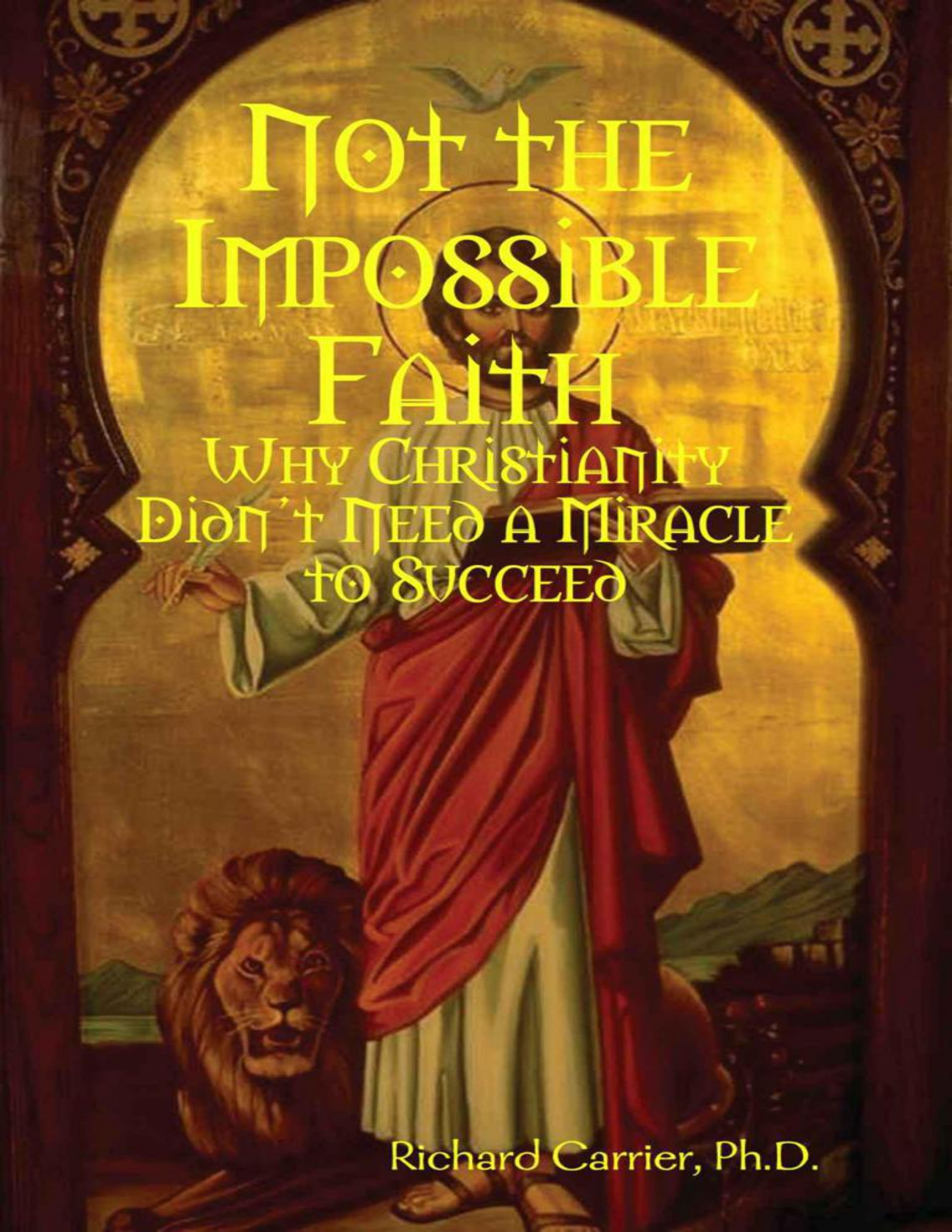

Not the Impossible Faith

Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed

Richard Carrier, Ph.D.

Not the Impossible Faith
Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed

by
Richard C. Carrier, Ph.D.

2009

For my fans. Keep fighting
for the truth, against error,
distortion, and lies.

Not the Impossible Faith:
Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed

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Contents

Introduction 7

The Dark Horse Rides 7
The White Knight Responds 8
Dark Horse Dead in the Water 9

1. Who Would Believe in a Crucified God? 14

Precedents and Distinctions 14
How Converts Differed from Critics 22
How Things Really Looked 29
Many Expected a Humiliated Savior 33
Conclusion 45

2. Who Would Follow a Man from Galilee? 47

Two Key Problems 47
Getting the Context Right 50
A Working Class Rabbi 52
The Galilean Connection 61
The Gospel of John 65
Holding Steps into a Trap 70
The Role of Messianic Prophecy 73
Why a Virgin Birth? 75
Conclusion 79

3. Was Resurrection Deemed Impossible? 80

The Popularity of Resurrection 80
Defending the Zoroastrian Connection 86
Debating Zalmoxis 97
How the Pagan Mission Changed Christianity 103
Jewish Background 112
Was There a Better Idea? 115

Conclusion 119

4. Was the New Always Bad? 120

5. Who Would Join a Moral Order? 125

Pagans Are Moral People Too 125
Christians Aren't Perfect Either 129
The Appeal of Communism 131
Conclusion 133

6. Who Would Join an Intolerant Cult? 136

The Popularity of Intolerance 136
First: Statistics 138
Second: Systemic Failure 141
Demons & Elite Corruption 142
Managing the Family 144
A Stigma of Atheism? 146
Which Is It, Jews or Judeans? 148
Conclusion 149

7. Was Christianity Vulnerable to Disproof? 150

General Argument 150
The Problem of Differing Research Paradigms 153
The Problem of Luke's Methods as a Historian 164
First Example: Luke on Paul's Trial 180
Holding's Argument Backfires 185
Second Example: Luke on Agrippa's Cause of Death 190
Public Miracles & the Problem of Finding Witnesses 195
Summary 203
Conclusion 206

8. Who Would Want to be Persecuted? 208

The Social Foundations of Martyrdom 208
Paul and Tertullian 215
Where Holding Gets it Wrong 221
What Hebrews Actually Says 227
Where Holding Gets it Right 232
Conclusion 233

9. Was a God Incarnate Always Repugnant? 235

Incarnation Among the Jews 235
Incarnation Among the Gentiles 241
Conclusion 242

10. Would Groupthinkers Never Switch Groups? 245

Getting it Backwards 245
What Do Malina & Neyrey Really Say? 248
How Christianity Fits the Malina-Neyrey Model 260
Malina and Neyrey on the Role of Revelation 270
Lack of Evidence for Holding's View 274
Conclusion 281

11. Did No One Trust Women? 283

There Is No Evidence Women Were a Problem 283
The Testimony of Women Was Trusted 286
Why Mark Places Women at the Empty Tomb 299
Conclusion 305

12. Did No One Trust Illiterate Laymen? 307

13. Would the Facts Be Checked? 313

Boiling away the Hyperbole 313
The Conversions in Acts 317
The Evidence as Reported in Acts 326
The Indications from Early Apologists 338
Conclusion 353

14. Who Would Follow an Ignorant Savior? 356

15. Who Would Follow an Executed Criminal? 360

16. Were Christian Teachings Too Radical? 362

Fallacies Galore 362
Misrepresenting Malina—Again 365
Conclusion 370

17. Did Christians Encourage Critical Inquiry? 371

Holding's Bogus Evidence 371
Method as Revealed in Paul 374

Survey of Passages Relating to Method 378
The Bankrupt Methods of J.P. Holding 385
The Last Ditch 389
Conclusion 391

18. How Successful Was Christianity? 393

Assumptions 393
Numbers: What the Texts Say 397
Numbers: What the Experts Say 410
With Whom Did Christianity Begin? 418
The Rise of World Christianity 425
Conclusion 430

Introduction

A common apologetic argument for the truth of the Christian religion is that its origins were too improbable for it to be false. This argument has appeared in many forms over the years, but most of the usual ideas are combined into a single popular effort by James Patrick Holding (alias Robert Tur-kel), a Christian minister and one-time prison librarian. J.P. Holding's argument is that the origin and success of Christianity in the ancient Roman Empire was so improbable it must have been based on a true story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This book refutes his argument. But in the process, it educates the reader on numerous fascinating aspects of ancient religion, history, society, and culture, and explains in entirely natural terms why Christianity was a success—when it actually was.

The Dark Horse Rides

J.P. Holding is something of a dark horse in the apologetics community. He is very popular online. I often travel the country, speaking to humanist groups near and far, and I always meet people who know his work. They are usually Christians once seduced by his rhetoric who later lost their faith upon discovering how horribly he'd misled them. It's perhaps not surprising then, that professional Christian apologists seem inclined not to associate with him. I suspect they don't want to be seen as endorsing his shoddy research, unprofessional demeanor, and unrepentant reliance on fallacious argument. Indeed, he insults whoever exposes his errors, and often responds by simply making things up.[1]

Originally, J.P. Holding had assembled his arguments in a lengthy and rambling online effort, which he constantly edited whenever criticized (so establishing its original text was no easy matter, though as he now presents it in five languages I assume he doesn't edit it much anymore).[2] He then greatly summarized his case in a convenient book form, *The Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Succeeded When It Should Have Failed* (Xulon Press: 2007).[3] He advertises this as "A Thesis So Explosive, An Atheist Paid $5,000 for An Answer." As it happens, I was the scholar paid (even more than that) to compose a well-researched refutation, which Holding conveniently never directs anyone to—nor does he ever name me, and his book doesn't even mention my refutations, much less address them.[4] He clearly *doesn't* want his readers to know where to find them or ever read them. That all but amounts to an admission of defeat.

The White Knight Responds

My original critique is still available online.[5] Holding did attempt a rebuttal, and I revised my online work in response to that, although his response consisted almost entirely of ignoring, misrepresenting, or misunderstanding nearly everything I wrote, while the rest consisted of substituting groundless assertions for evidence.[6]

The book you now have in your hands reproduces my entire critique still catalogued on the Secular Web, but is revised in three respects: I've added this new introduction; I've taken what is still in Chapter 19 online ("Responses to Critics") and re-integrated all that material into the other chapters where it belongs (so here there are only eighteen chapters); I've edited everything in various ways; and often what was an endnoted digression now appears in the main text. Some notes have also been deleted, others added, and many sections partly rewritten. But more than all that, as a book this can now be carried around, handed to friends, written in the margins, and actual page numbers cited.

In the following eighteen chapters I will compare Holding's claims and arguments with the actual facts of ancient history, identifying errors in his research, fallacies in his reasoning, and his frequent (I suspect deliberate) distortion of the facts. Holding presents seventeen factors "where Christianity 'did the wrong thing' in order to be a successful religion" and concludes from this that "the only way Christianity" could "succeed" under those seventeen hostile conditions was "because it was a truly revealed faith," in particular "because it had the irrefutable witness of the resurrection" behind it. Each of those points will be addressed in its own separate chapter, with a final chapter on a more general point pervading all the others.

Dark Horse Dead in the Water

One thing that's missing from Holding's paper is any sort of formal logical or statistical argument. The gist of it goes like this: Only if the evidence for the resurrection was truly unassailable would Christianity have succeeded at all. It succeeded. Therefore, the evidence for the resurrection must have been truly unassailable. If the evidence for the resurrection was truly unassailable, then we, too, should believe Jesus rose from the dead. But really his argument hinges on probabilities: even granting everything Holding argues, that Christianity would have succeeded without unassailable evidence of the resurrection is not *impossible*, only *improbable*.

Despite his rather hyperbolic language, even Holding must admit that the odds of Christianity becoming successful without being true could not be zero even on all of his own assumptions. Human behavior is not that predictable, nor are there any demonstrated historical "laws" that make any conclusion about historical cause-and-effect beyond all probability of error. So Holding can only mean that the probability of Christianity becoming successful, on all of his own premises and assumptions, is so low that we have no reasonable ground to believe it did —*unless* the evidence for the resurrection was strong enough to convince even us. In Holding's version of the argument, the "witness of the resurrection" must have been "irrefutable."

I won't quibble about what exactly "irrefutable" means, since I'll assume he means the "witness of the resurrection" was (and therefore is) as irrefutable as the historical fact that Christianity was successful. All observers agree with the latter statement, and we certainly should believe any statement that meets the same standard, which is Holding's aim. However, how improbable would the success of Christianity have to be before we have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus to explain that success? Holding never says. Nor does he say how improbable Christianity's success really was. Yet without comparing those two estimates, it's not really possible to confirm the success of Holding's argument. Many fantastically improbable things happen all the time,

simply because so many things happen. For example, “that’s about as likely as getting struck by lightning” is often used as a cliché of an event so improbable it never happens, yet over four hundred people are struck by lightning every year in the United States alone. Some people have been struck multiple times.[7] Hence our intuition often fails us when estimating the improbable.

Normally, this is not a barrier to historical inquiry, since we need only ascertain the *most* probable cause of an event, given all we know. And usually we can say that, given what we know, the most probable cause is the one that is most probably true, and therefore worthy of belief (though maybe only a tentative belief, depending on how much more probable it is than alternatives). However, in Holding’s case this requires trying to sort out three crucial questions:

> **(a)** Is the “prior probability” of a miracle from God greater than the prior probability of any alternative natural cause that explains the same evidence? For instance, the prior probability of my being struck by lightning is a lot lower than my prior probability of catching a cold, because the latter is more common than the former. What is the prior probability of a miraculous resurrection? And what are the prior probabilities of any alternative explanations of the same evidence?
>
> **(b)** What is the probability that a genuinely risen (and hence still living) Christ would actually produce *all* the evidence we have, *including* a Church preaching immoral doctrines such as the subjugation of women and the persecution of doubters?
>
> **(c)** What is the probability that natural causes would still make Christianity as successful as it was?

All this follows necessarily from Bayes’ Theorem.[8] Clearly miracles are less common than natural causes, just as getting struck by lightning is less common than catching a cold. Indeed, miraculous resurrections are obviously far less common than getting struck by lightning. But it’s not always the case that a hypothesis with a lower prior probability, as in (a), is less likely *true* than another, since a sufficiently high probability for (b)

along with a sufficiently low probability for (c) can overcome any prior probability, no matter how low with respect to any other hypothesis.

In laymen's terms, even though miracles must be extremely rare (since even at best we see few of them, and have yet to establish even one with anywhere near the same certainty as we have for countless other causes of even very bizarre events in history), and therefore miracles must be extremely improbable, it is still possible to have enough evidence to establish a high value for (b) and an extremely low value for (c), enough to make "miracle" the most probable explanation among all alternatives. Nevertheless, this does require a substantial scale of evidence, a fact that also follows necessarily from Bayes' Theorem, which follows a deductively valid argument, and therefore can't be gainsaid. Does Holding have that kind of evidence? And does it tip the scales of probability in the correct direction, and does it do so enough to overcome the initial improbability of miraculous causes? He never says, nor provides enough information to guess. We must also rule out, of course, the influence of a deceiving supernatural power, i.e. some force, such as Satan, who could bring about the same results through supernatural influence, as some Jews might allege for the success of Christianity.

Holding does not make any effort to answer these questions even vaguely. Thus, his conclusion can only be vaguely certain at best. Though this fact alone already leaves his argument dead in the water (since he produces no conclusions about the required relative probabilities, and no definite conclusion can be reached without them), I will nevertheless set this aside and assume (merely for the sake of argument) that Holding's case succeeds unless we can show that some set of natural causes, which we know for a fact happen more often than miracles do (i.e. natural causes that were not unusual or rare), were reasonably likely to have produced the same result (the actual success of the Christian Church). I will also assume for the sake of argument that all non-Christian supernatural causes that could logically be to blame are less probable than the most probable natural causes, whatever they may be. In other words, I will assume that if Jesus was not raised by God, then probably Christianity's success was due to natural causes, and not (for example) Satan.

1. Who Would Believe in a Crucified God?

Precedents and Distinctions

James Holding asks: “Who on earth would believe a religion centered on a crucified man?” Well, the Sumerians perhaps. One of their top goddesses, Inanna (the Babylonian Ishtar, “Queen of Heaven”), was stripped naked and crucified, yet rose again and, triumphant, condemned to Hell her lover, the shepherd-god Dumuzi (the Babylonian Tammuz). This became the center of a major Sumerian sacred story, preserved in clay tablets dating over a thousand years before Christ.[9]

The corresponding religion, which we now know included the worship of a crucified Inanna, is mentioned by Ezekiel as having achieved some popularity even within Jerusalem itself by the 6th century B.C. The “women weeping for Tammuz” at the north gate of the Jewish temple (Ezekiel 8:14) we now know were weeping because Inanna had condemned him to Hell, after herself being crucified and resurrected. So the influence of this religious story and its potent, apparently compelling allure upon pre-Christian Judaism is in evidence. Some Christians knew of the cult, too. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 250 A.D.) mention the cult of Tammuz and Astarte (a common transliteration of Ishtar) as among the heresies of the early Jews.[10] Origen and Hippolytus give important testimonies around the same time (c. 225 A.D.). Origen discusses Tammuz (whom he associates with Adonis) in his *Comments on Ezekiel* (*Selecta in Ezechielem*), noting that “they say that for a long time certain rites of initiation are conducted: first, that they weep for him, since he has died; second, that they rejoice for him because he has risen from the dead (*apo nekrôn anastanti*).”[11] Although the Sumerian records are incomplete, and thus do not preserve an account of the resurrection of Tammuz, we do know his death followed the resurrection of *Inanna*.

Even so, my point is not that the Christians got the idea of a crucified god from early Inanna cult. There may have been some direct or indirect influence we cannot trace. We can’t rule that out—the idea of worshipping a crucified deity *did* predate Christianity and *had* entered Jewish society in pre-Christian Palestine. But we don’t know any more

than that. I always caution strongly against overzealous attempts to link Christianity with prior religions.[12]

I can't deny there are some intriguing parallels, including those between this story of Inanna and the story of the Incarnation of the Lord told in the Ascension of Isaiah. There are many important differences, but it is curious that in the Sumerian story Inanna descends through the seven gates of Hell, with a different encounter at each level, and her humiliation and crucifixion occur at the bottom, while in the Jewish story the Savior (Jesus) descends through the seven heavens, with a different encounter at each level, and his humiliation and crucifixion occur at the bottom. Jesus also supposedly said he would be "three days and three nights" in the grave (Matthew 12:40), while Inanna herself was dead for three days and three nights. Of course, we are told Jesus was not actually dead for three nights, only at most two, but it remains curious why there would be a tradition of his saying otherwise, a tradition matching that of Inanna.[13]

I admit parallels like this are worth noting, but they are too little to make much of. For instance, Jonah 1:17 also shares the three-days-and-nights motif (and Matthew 12:40 explicitly draws from it), which probably derived from a common ancient concept of death.[14] Therefore, we needn't imagine the Christians "got the idea" of a third-day resurrection from Inanna cult (either directly or through intervening religions), because they might have "gotten the idea" from the same cultural ideologies governing the construction of the Inanna myth (and every other myth).

So the parallels aren't the issue. Rather, my point is that we have here a clear example of many people worshipping a crucified god. Therefore, as a matter of principle—unless Holding wants to claim that Inanna really was resurrected—it appears that people *would* worship a false crucified god. Therefore, Holding cannot claim this is improbable. Holding has tried to protest that Inanna wasn't really crucified. But being humiliated by being stripped naked, killed, and nailed up in shame amounts to the same thing to any reasonable observer. The story itself emphasizes the humiliation of it. Holding asserts without any evidence that such treatment was not a humiliation in ancient Sumer, but it seems clear that Inanna was treated that way in the story precisely *because* it was humiliating to strip someone naked and hang their shamed corpse up in public view. Though we can't trace how far back this goes, such public hanging to shame corpses was certainly a practice more ancient than

Roman times, even more ancient than Israel.[15] It was already a method of legal shaming in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, and the Old Testament itself establishes the practice as so horrible it was a "curse to God" that could "defile the land."[16] At the very least, Holding has no grounds to claim that what was done to Inanna wasn't humiliating to Sumerians, especially when done to a queen—for like all ancient cultures, Sumer was also an honor-shame society (a fact Holding concedes), and in such a context hanging up the naked, unburied corpse of royalty would surely have been among the gravest of insults.

Holding also protests that Inanna was already revered before she died. But so was the God who had already proclaimed in his ancient oracles the vindication of his humiliated Son and Christ, so the advantage was the same. Finally, Holding concludes that my argument validates his by proving "a crucified deity would require a vindication to be worshipped," but there was no more evidence that Inanna was "really vindicated" by resurrection than Jesus was. And that is exactly my point: if people could believe she was vindicated without "irrefutable evidence," then so, too, Jesus.

Hence Holding is certainly correct that the point of crucifixion was extreme humiliation (as well as terror), and it was certainly a commonplace view held by the elite, especially the more snobbish, that to die in such a way was the ultimate disgrace and embarrassment. However, just because many people find some idea repugnant does not mean everyone does, nor does this mean it was regarded as repugnant by those who converted. Ancient literature (by far most of it written by the rich and well-connected) is full of disgust towards the humiliating careers of prostitutes or slaves, and yet there were still people even willing to *choose* the life of a hooker or slave. Likewise, to be a gladiator was a shameful embarrassment among the rich, and yet gladiators could become famous and revered among the poor.[17]

For a more direct parallel, consider the cult of Attis and Cybele: this was a popular religion, with priests and followers all over the Roman Empire, yet it centered on the worship of a eunuch (the castrated Attis), and priests as a result castrated themselves in honor of their god.[18] And this despite the fact that the emasculating act of castration was among the worst of embarrassing disgraces to the snobbish elite, just as crucifixion was. This point is demonstrated by a passage from Seneca, who (as a

famous philosopher, rich land owner, and advisor to emperors) definitely represents someone deeply invested in the elite power structure. Seneca wrote of this practice of castration (and acts of mutilation promoted by other popular cults):

> If anyone has leisure to view what they do and what they suffer, he will find practices so in-decent for honorable men, so unworthy of free men, so unlike those of sane men, that if their number were fewer no one would have any doubt they were demented. As it is, the only support for a plea of sanity is found in the number of the mad throng.[19]

Thus, even something so foul and repugnant to an elite scholar like Seneca nevertheless commanded a large following. There can be no ground for claiming Christianity was any different than the cult of Cybele and Attis in this regard. One man's disgrace was apparently another man's holy salvation. Contrary to Holding's assumption, the most repugnant beliefs could command large followings.

Holding still asks why the Attis cult then failed—as if he didn't know the Attis cult survived for centuries before Christianity took over the government, and only "failed" when it was actively destroyed. As decreed by Emperor Theodosius in A.D. 395:

> We decree that no one shall have the right to approach any shrine or temple whatsoever, or to perform abominable sacrifices in any place or time whatsoever. Therefore all who try to deviate from the dogma of the Catholic Church shall hurry to observe it.[20]

This consolidated and reinforced laws that had already been passing since 391. The penalties ranged from death to the confiscation of land and property.[21]

As a consequence of this, open persecution of pagans began in earnest. Some fled, some converted, and others adapted their paganism to be less offensive to their Christian opponents. Though some communities, such as Alexandria, had so large a pagan community as to thwart the exercise of imperial power, this was a state of defiance that led inevitably to riots and violence (including the burning of one of the two great

libraries at Alexandria, and the hideous flaying of the Platonist teacher Hypatia). Nevertheless, the philosophical schools in Athens (which attempted to find ways to make paganism palatable to the Christian authorities) remained active until they were forced to close by Emperor Justinian in A.D. 529—by which point the Western Roman Empire had long since collapsed, and the Eastern Empire had its own endless troubles. After that there was every incentive to simply join the crowd and become a Christian, and urban paganism completely vanished by the 8th century.

Throughout this sad tale, it was always possible to defy the imperial edicts, as long as no one noticed, or couldn't do anything about it. Ultimately, paganism survived mainly in rural communities (the *pagi*, hence *pagani*, "pagans"), which were often beyond the reach of an overextended government.[22] But open worship was suppressed. For example, paralleling (and preceding) the events in Alexandria is the fate of the pagan stronghold of Gaza. Gaza was mostly pagan in 390 A.D., with only 280 Christians out of some 10,000 inhabitants. But when miracles performed by a new bishop sent to "correct" the city only won over another 163 converts, the rest of the city was converted by horrifying displays of force and cruelty.[23]

Holding's rhetorical question thus amounts to using the fact that Christianity outlawed the Attis cult into extinction as evidence for the inability of the Attis cult to survive because it was false, which is already a *non sequitur*. Therefore, when Holding argues that "Christianity would either have died out and/or thoroughly revamped itself" because that is what happened to the Attis cult, there is no logical connection between his premise and conclusion. Of course, it just so happens that Christianity *did* revamp itself, quite often throughout its growth, as I'll point out in Chapter 18 and in the first part of Chapter 2. And the original Christian religion of Peter and James *did* die out, replaced by the religion of Paul, which (among other things) abandoned Jewish law and practice precisely to ensure the religion's success. It was only by changing that Christianity survived at all—and it was only by seizing control of the axe of government that Christianity could finally eliminate its competitors.

Holding likewise snipes at my supposedly having no grounds to say that the Attis cult "commanded a very large following," even though I cite several scholarly sources surveying the literary and archaeological evidence demonstrating it had a considerable and highly visible presence

—certainly enough to establish that its membership empire-wide was "very large" (almost certainly in the hundreds of thousands). As I'll show in Chapter 18, we have no evidence that in the first century Christianity was any more successful (as in, commanded any greater a following) than any other cult, including the Attis cult. It's a fact that we have abundant archaeological evidence of the Attis cult all over the Roman Empire, but none whatsoever of a Christian presence until the 3rd century—at which point I openly allow that Christianity probably overtook any particular competitor (including the Attis cult) in size of membership. As I explain in Chapter 18, "only in the 3rd century does material evidence of a Christian presence, anywhere in the Empire, begin to match that of even minor pagan cults," and indeed it might then have begun to exceed them. But of course, as I'll also explain there, Christian growth by that point has no bearing on Holding's argument anymore (as he himself admits). And before then, *there is no evidence* that Christianity was even as large as the Attis cult, much less any other competing religion. That's my argument. And it remains true.

Therefore, it does no good to present examples of people who find something repugnant or embarrassing—especially from the literate elite. Christianity won over very few of those elite until it had positions of power and authority to offer them within a wealth-generating Church hierarchy (by the mid-to-late 2nd century), amidst an otherwise collapsing social system (in the mid-3rd century), as I'll discuss in Chapter 18. Rather, what we want to know is whether *anyone* would find a crucified god acceptable or even praiseworthy, and whether it was those very people who became Christians. That means we must study the attitudes of those who converted—*not* the attitudes of those who refused or attacked the religion. Obviously, many people rejected Christianity because it was repugnant to them in various ways, and probably would have rejected it no matter what evidence confirmed its truth. That's why Christianity never won universal acceptance until it had the power to compel that acceptance under pain of death or exile or loss of property (by the end of the 4th century A.D.).

How Converts Differed from Critics

When we engage this correct approach, however, we find there are two relevant facts that Holding omits from his consideration. First, the early Christians were in a significantly different social position than those who most looked down on the form of Christ's death, and we know they had credible reasons not to share the elite view when it came to Jesus. Second, among *some* Jews there was a certain expectation that the Messiah *had* to be humiliated as part of God's plan to secure his triumph, and these Jews would not find a crucified messiah repugnant—to the contrary, it would be exactly what they were looking for.

The first point becomes clear when we read the early teachings in Paul and Acts, and compare them with the teachings of the Essene community at Qumran. Like the Qumran community, the early Christians appear to have come from a disgruntled poor and middle class who had grown disgusted with the fundamental injustices in their society and government, especially social and economic inequities (as evidenced by the Christian desire, attested in Paul and Acts, to eliminate those very inequities within the Church itself, e.g. Galatians 3:28, Acts 4:32-35, etc.), but also the execution of righteous men. The fate of John the Baptist is a case in point: executed by the state, yet still held in high esteem by a great many Jews.[24] Many even expected God might raise John from the dead before the general resurrection of Israel.[25]

Holding argues against this that those who thought Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist "either thought John was raised by means other than resurrection, or that this was done in anticipation of a general resurrection that was shortly to take place." I'm glad Holding thinks so, since that is in fact what the early Christians thought of Jesus: that he was raised "in anticipation of a general resurrection that was shortly to take place" (as I'll point out in Chapter 3). But Holding seems to be getting ahead of himself here, since I mention this fact (that some believed, in the words of Mark 6:14, that "John the Baptist is risen from the dead") only as evidence that John was revered. So here it doesn't matter how or why John was raised: the fact that many Jews expected God would raise him can be

taken as evidence that John was revered. That's the only reason I bring it up here. In any case, it's a contradiction in terms to say John was raised from the dead by some means other than being raised from the dead, so I'm not sure what Holding has in mind here, except perhaps an appeal to the entirely modern terminological dichotomy between 'resurrection' and 'resuscitation' (which I address in Chapter 3). There were certainly many different conceptions of how someone could return from the dead in a new or healed body. But no matter how they quibbled over the details, bodily returning from the dead was still a bodily return from the dead. And here the issue is not the implied metaphysics of John's imagined return, but the fact that so many believed God would honor an executed man with such a privileged miracle.

If John could be revered despite the embarrassment of execution, so could Jesus. This would have been no less likely had John been crucified —to the contrary, the outrage at this insult to his honor would be all the greater, and popular reverence for his unjust suffering all the greater for it. So as long as someone believed Jesus had also been a righteous man crucified *unjustly* (which converts always had to be persuaded of *first*), his crucifixion would have been no stumbling block at all. To the contrary, it would be testimony to his greatness. It would make him *even more* a hero than any other death could have.

This was especially true among Jews and their sympathizers, who already had a tradition of revering humiliated martyrs, *and* among the poor, disillusioned, and disenfranchised, who *expected* good men to be humiliated and murdered by the corrupt elites they despised.[26] The first century Jewish historian Josephus offers an example of the crucified still being regarded as the "best and noblest" of men: he says many Jews cravenly gave in and abandoned God's laws when Antiochus crucified the Maccabean supporters, but "the most excellent men, and those with noble souls, didn't care about this, but held more thought for the customs of the fatherland than for the punishment he inflicted" upon them.[27] Thus, exactly as predicted, Josephus held crucified men in high esteem—so long as they died righteously like Jesus. Indeed, Josephus uses a clever play on words here: he employs *timôria*, "vengeance, punishment," which sounds almost exactly like *timô*, "honor, hold in high esteem," hence implying that this crucifixion, though a punishment to Antiochus, was an honor to its victims, who stood firm before God.

Hence, indeed, “standing up to the man,” as modern slang would put it, was a surefire way to win reverence among these groups. Obviously “the man” did not feel that way—hence those who looked down on Christians for worshipping a crucified god were typically invested in the wealthy power structure, Jewish or Gentile. In contrast, we don’t have on record anyone outside that structure scorning the idea. Though many may well have—just as jail time today can be a badge of honor *or* disgrace among the lower classes, depending on the circumstances. Hence those of any class who were unconvinced that Jesus was righteous could certainly mock the manner of his end.

Holding offers one piece of evidence allegedly to the contrary, although it is rather late and ambiguous: the famous Palatine Graffito of around 200 A.D.[28] Most probably this was written by a member of the middle class (free or slave), though we don’t know exactly why, or what he meant by it (or whether the author was mocking or merely depicting the crucifixion), and Holding can’t claim to know this author wasn’t well-invested in the elite power structure by being dependent upon it and supporting it (after all, the location—inside the Imperial Palace—suggests otherwise). Hol-ding thinks it doesn’t matter that this is “late.” But he clearly doesn’t understand my argument about social attitudes. In light of what I *actually* argue, the fact that this record is late *does* matter: for the social and political situation of Christianity had significantly changed by then, and pagan disgust or resentment was even greater. And since we cannot know what if anything is being mocked by the image, it’s difficult to draw the conclusions Holding wants. For example, the fact that the god is depicted as crucified may merely be because he was, while the only intended insult may be the god’s depiction as an ass. Whether a god’s *crucifixion* was being mocked would depend on whether the author thought the god was crucified justly or unjustly. Since we don’t know what the author was thinking, we can’t draw any useful conclusions.

Holding also says there is no reason to believe the author was a member of the middle class. But the reason we conclude he was is obvious to anyone who knows Greek: the graffito is misspelled. In fact, the error is a common phonetic mistake that would typically be made by someone who knew Greek orally but was not very literate. Since no adult elite would be so inept in Greek (even Romans were expected to be fluent), and it was rare for the poor to write any Greek at all, it follows that (exactly as

I say) “most probably this was written by a member of the middle class.” The location of the graffito (inside the imperial palace) further supports this conclusion (it likely originated from a member of the imperial staff). Finally, Holding has ignored all my explanations of what I mean by those who are “well-invested in the elite power structure.” I very definitely intend a limited group who, as I say of Seneca, are so invested in the system that they would not be sympathetic to critics of that system, but would regard attacks on the system as attacks on themselves. Obviously this did not include *everyone*, for there are copious examples of critics of the system, inside and outside Christianity (see examples in Chapters 2 and 12).

So when we look at the early success of Christianity, in its first century it was nowhere so successful as among the poor, the disillusioned, the disenfranchised, and Jews and their sympathizers (like the faithful centurion of Luke 7:2-6). That Christianity won success principally among these groups is evident in Acts, where successes are achieved primarily within Jewish communities and synagogues, and elsewhere most often by recruiting slaves and women. Roman citizens or anyone of wealth or power (who were not already Jews or sympathizers) were rare among converts. In other words, Christianity was most successful among those very people who would have empathized most with the story of Jesus and could *admire* his unjust manner of death. And for at least a century it had no known success with the very kinds of people who *did* scorn Christ’s manner of death: wealthy, politically-connected scholars (whose writings are the only ones we have that scorn the manner of Christ’s death).

The fact that the early Christian movement began among those outside the elite social structure, and only later worked its way up the social ladder in later centuries, is the consensus view among qualified experts, and is almost too obvious to need proving.[29] It’s even explicitly admitted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26. As far as we know, the highest ranking ‘post-resurrection’ converts in the first hundred years of Christianity are the centurion Cornelius, the proconsul Sergius Paulus, and Dionysius the Areopagite (if we trust Luke, the only source to report these conversions). But Cornelius was already a devout Jewish sympathizer (Acts 10:1-2, 10:22).[30] Likewise, the centurionate was a distinctly middle-class occupation, which contained its own daunting galaxy of social ranks, wherein disillusionment with the system (especially for a religious

minority) would not be unusual. And though Sergius is a unique case in terms of social status, it's likely he was also a Jewish sympathizer, given his close association with the Jewish sorcerer Elymas bar Jesus and the fact that Luke calls him "a discerning man" who *wanted* to hear the "Word of God" (Acts 13:6-12). Moreover, Sergius was certainly not an "elite scholar"—for surely if that were so, he would have left writings to posterity, which Christians would have eagerly preserved (see my brief discussion of Sergius in Chapter 13). So, too for Dionysius (Acts 17:16-34), since the writings attributed to him have been universally rejected as much later works by an unknown author, and members of the Areopagus were frequently of the same social rank as centurions, i.e. upper middle class.[31] Moreover, by Roman times this council could have included some Jews or Jewish sympathizers, yet we are not told what the prior religious convictions of Dionysius were.

Nevertheless, Holding mistakenly claims I'm saying "the ancient everyday man ... would not have held the same disdain for a shamed person." That is not what I'm arguing. I never claim there was any general difference. Rather, I'm very clearly arguing that *certain members* of ancient society would not regard the humiliation of *an innocent man* as shaming him, but as an insult to his honor—the exact opposite of what Holding argues. Holding doesn't seem to understand that I limit my point twice: first, I limit my claim to a very particular cross-section of people, which I carefully define—and not to "the ancient everyday man" as some sort of blanket category; and second, I limit my claim to attitudes toward the treatment of *righteous men*—and not to just any "shamed person."

Of course, contrary to Holding's denial of the fact, I have presented (here and in Chapter 8) a lot of evidence that certain people in antiquity did not regard humiliated martyrs as disgraced, but as *insulted* by unjust treatment, and rather than ceasing to revere them, revered them all the more, and hated all the more those who unjustly humiliated such good men. It thus does not matter what the Japanese have done, or what modern Iraqis do (Holding's counter-examples, which are not only irrelevant, but also bogus). What matters is what the ancients did within the Roman Empire. And contrary to Holding's ridiculous claim that the masses universally approved all the values and behaviors of the elite, I present copious evidence soundly refuting him (in Chapter 12 especially, but also in Chapters 2, 5, and 17). Never mind that *every single qualified expert on*

ancient culture agrees with me, including Holding's own favorite sources (Malina, Fox, Stark, DeSilva, and so on—just read them for yourselves, as cited in the following chapters).

Holding knows he can't find anyone to side with him, which must be why he only quotes (and at inordinate length) what *other* scholars say about *completely different* situations in *completely different* cultures. It is all the worse that what Holding claims about these unrelated cases is either irrelevant or false. It follows from the very nature of an honor-shame society that when those who deserve honor (like Jesus) are treated disgracefully, they are not abandoned in shame, but *defended* against such insults to their honor—this is true in Iraq and Japan, and the ancient Mediterranean. Shame a righteous man in either Japan or Iraq and see how quickly the crowd turns against *you*, and not against the man you insulted.

Likewise, Holding seems not to know that hundreds of thousands of Saddam Hussein's own people gave their lives fighting *against* him, for decades—a far cry from "coming to admire the tyrant" as Holding alleges. Nor does he seem to grasp the difference between Iraqis defending *Iraq* and Iraqis defending *Saddam.* You need not share your leader's values to fight for your homeland (especially against meddling foreigners), and surely Holding does not imagine that all Iraqis shared or even accepted Saddam's twisted values. Likewise, Holding is apparently unaware of the several rebellions and social conflicts that have plagued Japanese history, especially in the 17th and 19th centuries.[32] As with all such cultures, class discontent is unleashed when the elites fail to deliver the social harmony expected from them—exactly the circumstance Christianity found itself in, a point made again and again by Malina, DeSilva, and every other expert I've read. Indeed, the entire history of Rome is the history of class struggle between the commons and the aristocracy, which often broke out into wars and protests. Consult any textbook on the history of the Roman Republic, especially on the most pivotal events, from the fate of the Gracchi to the Social War to Caesar's political campaigns.

The conclusion is clear: Holding has no evidence that a crucified god was a stumbling block to anyone who actually converted to Christianity. Presenting evidence that it may have been a barrier for those who *didn't* convert only explains the obvious: why those people didn't convert. But did those who *converted* share the same values and opinions on this

matter? Not only has Holding not demonstrated they did, it’s not even plausible they would.

How Things Really Looked

So it seems that Holding has no case here. Yes, someone who found the idea of revering a crucified man repugnant would need very powerful evidence to convert—exactly as Holding argues. But there is no evidence any such person converted, at least for a hundred years after Christ's death, and after that all opportunity to inspect the evidence would be gone. So Holding's argument turns out to be irrelevant to the actual history of early Christianity. Instead, with a lone exception (Sergius, as noted earlier and in later chapters), all those who converted within that period—insofar as we can assign them to any social group at all—do *not* appear to have belonged to any of the social groups who would routinely scorn the idea of revering a crucified man. Rather, they belonged to groups who would readily accept or even cherish the idea of a righteous man martyred for his principles. And for them a crucified hero would be even more a hero, *precisely because* crucifixion was intended by the despised elite to be the ultimate humiliation. To deify such a man could easily be sold as an attractive "f-you" to the corrupt powers of Judea and Rome: for then the good man triumphs despite their greatest efforts to destroy him in the most degrading way possible. Indeed, these very efforts at degrading honorable men were exactly the kind of thing the disillusioned despised about those in power.

Ultimately, for a crucified man to be victorious stands as a testimony to the *impotence* of the corrupt leaders, and that was the very thing the oppressed wanted most to believe: that there is a greater power the wicked elite cannot defeat no matter how hard they try. Obviously, a supernaturally victorious conqueror was what people wanted more. But there was never any such person. So for the Jews and their sympathizers and other social underdogs, the only heroes left were martyrs—for the only way left to claim that the corrupt power structure was really *powerless* was to point to someone who triumphed despite their every efforts to degrade him (as I show in Chapter 8), and lacking any *real* such hero, only someone whose triumph was invisible to all but the eye of faith could win anything like wide support. That's exactly what the early

Christians were striving for. That was the "market niche" they most ably exploited. And in that context, the Christ story was sure to be a hit.

This is confirmed by the fact that the Gospel did not *really* preach a god crucified. No one converted thinking they were worshipping a defeated, disgraced god. To the contrary, from the very beginning the Gospel preached a God crucified *and raised to glory*. Many a potential convert could find that attractive. Christ was a victorious god receiving the ultimate honor, not a god defeated in humiliation. His crucifixion was only a temporary defeat. The god actually being *worshipped*, therefore, was not defeated at all—he lived, and sat on the ultimate heavenly throne, his power attested on earth in the charisma, conviction, and "miracles" that belief in him inspired (more on that point in Chapter 13). Not everyone bought it, of course. But many would have. And many did. The crucified Christ was the ultimate hero, who soon would save us all from the awful, corrupt world we despise and can no longer control, while raining down punishment on the wicked elite who seem to us so untouchable. That this hero had to die at the hands of elite conspirators in order to gain this ultimate power was not unusual—many a god required just such a path, from the Sumerian Inanna, to the Egyptian Osiris, to the Roman Romulus.

I discussed Inanna earlier. Osiris was likewise murdered, dismembered, buried, then ascended to heaven to become "the Supreme Father of the Gods."[33] Like the Inanna myth, the Osiris myth also contained curious yet inconclusive parallels with the Christ story. Although it's otherwise a very different tale, there are still a few similarities that might be too unusual to be coincidental: both were "sealed" in their tomb or casket; both were killed by seventy-two conspirators; both rose on the third day after their death; and both resurrections took place during a full moon.[34] Another God who submitted to being murdered in order to triumph was the well-revered Roman national deity Romulus, whose death and resurrection was celebrated in annual public ceremonies in Rome since before Christian times.[35] Though again a very different story, the Romulan tale shared with Christ's at least the following elements: both were incarnated gods (Romulus descended from heaven to become human and die); both became incarnate in order to establish a kingdom on earth (for Romulus, the Roman Empire; for Christ, the Kingdom of God, i.e. the Church); there was a supernatural darkness at both their deaths (as in Mark 15:33, etc.); both were killed by a conspiracy

of the ruling powers (Christ, by the Jewish and Roman authorities; Romulus, by the first Roman senate); both corpses vanished when sought for (in the earliest and canonical Gospels Christ's tomb is found empty—no one sees him rise); both appear after their resurrection to a close follower on an important road (Proculus on the road to Alba Longa; Cleopas on the road to Emmaus—both roads 14 miles long, the one leading *to* Rome, the other *from* Jerusalem); both connected their resurrections with moral teachings (Romulus instructs Proculus to tell the Romans they will achieve a great empire if they are virtuous); both "appeared" around the break of dawn; both ascended to heaven (according to Luke 24:50-55, Acts 1:9-11); both were hailed "God, Son of God, King, and Father"; and in the public Roman ceremony, the names were recited in public of those who fled in fear when the body of Romulus vanished, just as we "know" the names of those who fled in fear when the body of Jesus vanished (Mark 16:8), and in both cases the story went that these people kept their silence for a long time and *only later* proclaimed Romulus a risen god (just as the women in Mark's account "told no one" and in Luke's account the Christians waited fifty days before proclaiming their "discovery" to the public: Acts 1:3, 2:1-11).

Both Osiris and Romulus were dismembered. So was Orpheus, and Bacchus before his own resurrection and ascension to heaven.[36] And though Jesus is not dismembered, his clothes were (e.g. Mark 15:24), and clothing was a common metaphor for the body in Jewish thought.[37] But this is a far more tentative parallel than the others. In any case, my point is not that there has been borrowing (just as I argued earlier), but that there were many gods who had to be killed to rise to glory and receive worship, so there was nothing unusual, and thus nothing improbable, in the same happening for Christ.

Many Expected a Humiliated Savior

This idea of a suffering, executed god would resonate especially with those Jews and their sympathizers who *expected* a humiliated messiah. Jewish scripture declared that "The Redeemer of Israel" or "The Holy One of God" shall be "despised" by men, and nations will be "disgusted" with him, yet he shall triumph;[38] the people will "bury him with the wicked" even though he was innocent, and he shall be "num-bered with the transgressors" just as the Gospel of Mark says.[39] The idea that a Chosen One of God must suffer total humiliation and execution at the hands of the wicked is a major theme in Isaiah.[40] Thus, N.T. Wright's claim that "Messiahship in Judaism, such as it was, never envisaged someone ... suffering the fate he suffered" is demonstrably false—insofar as Isaiah 52-53 and Daniel 9 both envision such a fate, and other evidence clearly allows it. Even David, a common prototype of the Messiah, sings in Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" for "I am a worm" and "a reproach to men, despised by the people" and "all that see me laugh and scorn." This song set up a Jewish model for a crucified Davidic savior.[41]

The pre-Christian text of the *Wisdom of Solomon* also declares that the wicked will "condemn to a shameful death" the holiest man of God, because they are "blinded by their wickedness" and "do not know the secret purposes of God" and it's said this righteous man, "a son of god," who is given a shameful execution will be raised and exalted by God to avenge his death.[42] This was a lesson that would automatically apply to the Messiah, who would be, by definition, a blameless and righteous man. For those who understood (or were taught) the Jewish idea of sin and atonement, this would make even *more* sense, since in order for Christ's death to properly atone for *all* sins, his sacrifice had to be the most extreme imaginable—and hardly any sacrifice was more extreme than submitting to crucifixion. Such an atoning sacrifice was overtly anticipated in Isaiah, as declared in Romans 4:23-25, "it was written" that

the Christ will be killed to atone (per Isaiah 53:4-6, 11-12). And Jesus *had* to die to be vindicated (per Philemon 2:5-11).[43]

And we have evidence this text was probably understood by some in just this way, for the preeminent prophecy of the coming Messiah declares this very fate:

> The Christ shall be utterly destroyed yet there is no judgment upon him, then the city and the sanctuary will be torn down by the ruler who shall come. They will be knocked down in a cataclysm, until the end, when after war wreaks havoc there will be a systematic extermination.[44]

This Jewish prophecy was widely known in the Jewish and Roman world, and interpreted in many different ways—by the Romans, as presaging the crowning of Vespasian as Emperor, and by the Jews, as presaging a military victory over Rome, even though the prophecy plainly says their anticipated messiah will be *killed* (despite his innocence), and that the Jews will be *defeated* (though later vindicated in the Apocalypse).

This Danielic prophecy is probably alluded to by Suetonius, stating that "an ancient superstition was current in the East, that out of Judea at this time would come the rulers of the world."[45] Josephus states that the main reason the Jews made war on Rome "was an ambiguous prophecy found in their sacred writings, announcing that at that time someone from their country would become ruler of the world."[46] Tacitus writes:

> In most there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was con-tained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judea, were to acquire universal empire ... and these mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty des-tinies of themselves, and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth.[47]

The same prophecy's interpretation as anticipating Christ's death in 30 A.D. is attested by Julius Africanus, a Christian chronologer who laid it out two centuries later.[48] As one can plainly see from the text itself, the

Danielic prophecy predicts *two* men, an "anointed" (a *christ*) who will be executed though innocent, and a "ruler" (a *hegemon*) who will destroy Jerusalem and its temple, and conquer the world for a while, but then "come to his end" (Daniel 11:45), after which shall be the Apocalypse (Daniel 12), when all these injustices will be righted by God.

So we have the lesson of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, combined with Isaiah 52-53 (which explicitly describes a humiliated servant of God who is subsequently exalted) and the way David could be imagined to speak of himself (e.g. humiliated and killed in Psalm 22, then sojourning in the land of the dead in Psalm 23, then exalted to glory in Psalm 24). But most of all, we have Daniel 9, which outright says the Messiah will be unjustly killed—while Isaiah and the *Wisdom of Solomon* confirm that he will then (like other righteous men) rise again in divine triumph.

Holding argues that these messianic Old Testament passages I cite describing a suffering righteous servant of God were "never" used or interpreted as referring to the messiah. Of course, he doesn't actually have evidence it was *never* so used. Holding can't prove his case by adducing evidence that some Jews saw things differently, since I only propose that some (not all) Jews held this conception, and unlike his invisible elite scholars (see Chapter 18), we know there were many diverse Jewish sects and views that do not survive in the record. So no argument from silence can establish the blanket negative that Holding's argument requires. Even so, I do not merely argue the possibility, but the actuality, and so I willingly accept the burden of proving my claim. And so I do: all the passages and texts I cite (above and below) predate Christianity, and at least one *clearly and unambiguously refers to the messiah*, while the others clearly support the same general picture.

Holding foolishly proclaims that all Jews expected a messiah who "would successfully rout the Romans," even though the pre-Christian book of Daniel, a book *written by Jews*, says *exactly the opposite*: "the Christ shall be utterly destroyed yet there is no judgment upon him," and then a ruler would come and destroy the Temple (as the Romans did). The Septuagint actually has the word *Christos* in 9:25, with *Chrisma* in 9:26 (which refers to *Christos* by metonymy), and the original text has *Mashiyach* ("Messiah") in both passages. Thus, rather than expecting a messiah to "rout the Romans," some Jews plainly expected a messiah to be *killed*, even though innocent, and thus *fail* to rout Judea's conquerors.

Holding cannot claim this text is “late,” wasn’t Jewish, or wasn’t about the messiah—for it says it’s about the messiah!

That soundly refutes Holding. But let’s look at my other evidence anyway. Some of it could be interpreted a different way (like Isaiah 49 or Psalms 22) and so those passages only support the plausibility of my point. But others are as clear as the passage from Daniel. For example, consider Isaiah 52:7-53:12:

> How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of **him that brings the Gospel**, publish-ing peace, bringing the Gospel of good things, that announces salvation, that says to Zion, "Your God rules!" .... for Jehovah has com-forted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem .... Behold, **my servant shall deal wisely, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high** .... Who has believed **our mes-sage**? And to whom has the arm of Jehovah been revealed?
>
> For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. **He was despised, and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our ini-quities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. And with his stripes we are healed.**
>
> All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. And Jehovah has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, yet when he was afflicted he opened not his mouth. As **a lamb that is led to the slaughter**, and as a sheep that be-fore its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. **By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who among them considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? And they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no viol-ence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.**

> Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise him. He has put him to grief. When you shall make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of Jehovah shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by the knowledge of himself **shall my right-eous servant justify many**. And he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I **will divide him a portion with the great**, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong. Because **he poured out his soul unto death, and was number-ed with the transgressors**: yet he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Here we have a pre-Christian text, written by Jews, predicting that a "righteous servant" of God, "chosen" by God, shall suffer, be despised, and be buried a criminal, even though innocent, and then shall be exalted, raised up, and made great—and that in so doing, he shall "justify" and "heal" the Jews, carry away their "sorrows" and "sins," and "the pleasure of Jehovah shall prosper in his hand." How could any Jew *not* have understood this to mean that a righteous, wise, chosen servant of God would be wrongly despised, convicted, and executed, and in so doing save Israel from its sins and afflictions? That is, after all, *exactly what the text says*.

Isaiah also says this servant will be "cut off" though "he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." Then Daniel later says the messiah will be "cut off" though "there is no legal judgment against him." These sure sound like the same man. In fact, it sounds like Daniel is alluding to Isaiah's servant and predicting that he will be the messiah. Since scholars agree the book of Daniel was actually written in the 2nd century B.C., during a time of Greek persecution, it's quite possible the author had such an allusion in mind. Moreover, since Daniel 9:26 is otherwise obscure and strange, but makes perfect sense once linked to Isaiah 52-53, it's reasonable to infer that Daniel 9:26 *is* a messianic interpretation of Isaiah 52-53. Though the Hebrew employs different verbs in each case for "kill," they both mean "cut off." And though the following Hebrew is unclear, the later (but still pre-Christian) translation employed the Greek word *krima* for "judgment," which connotes a formal legal judgment, thus clarifying that an unjust execution is what the author of

Daniel had in mind—hence a shameful but undeserved death, exactly as Isaiah envisioned.

Maybe this is too speculative for J.P. Holding. Sure, one might argue that a man who "brings the gospel" as the "servant" of God, who is "righteous" and shall be "exalted," yet whose "life shall be made an offering for sin," bring "salvation," and "redeem" all Israel would *not* be understood as the messiah. As improbable as that may seem, let's suppose no one saw the obvious. The text of Isaiah *still* predicts a righteous, innocent man who will bring the gospel and announce salvation, yet be shamed, humiliated, executed, and buried as a criminal, but whose death will bring salvation and atone for the sins of Israel. And the same text *still* predicts that this man will be accounted righteous and exalted by God after his shameful death. Therefore, even if no Jew understood this passage to be about the messiah, it remains undeniable that all Jews would see this passage as predicting *exactly what the Christians were preaching about Jesus*. Therefore, there could be no stigma attached to a "righteous man" who exactly fit Isaiah's description, whether he was called the messiah or not. The Jews clearly anticipated such a person, regardless of what formal title they cared to bestow on him.

Either way, it's unreasonable to believe that *no* Jews understood these texts to refer to such a man, especially since it says God intends to send out a messenger to deliver the "Gospel" that brings "Salvation," and that this man will be humiliated with a shameful but undeserved death, and then exalted thereafter. But even in general, Isaiah 52-53 still clearly preaches that a man *like* Jesus should be revered, and that even a man despised, shamed, and buried a criminal *could* and *should* be praised and exalted—so long as he was wise and innocent, as Jesus was. And this is enough to destroy Holding's premise that no Jew would see Jesus as worthy of reverence because of his ignoble fate. Quite the contrary: the Jew's own sacred text says we *should* revere such a man (so, too, Isaiah 50:4-9). And that is exactly my point.

The same teaching is clearly conveyed in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, which presents the very same lesson: that a "righteous man" whose "soul is blameless," yet is mistreated "with insult and torture" and wrongly condemned to a "shameful death" (2:19-22; compare Mark 15:29-32), is in fact a "Son of God" (2:13, 2:16, 2:18, 5:5) who will be resurrected (3) and crowned by God (5), while those who *despise* him will be condemned.

This lesson certainly predates Christianity, which makes this another example of how Jewish values were primed for *accepting* the story of Jesus, not rejecting it.

Indeed, the *Wisdom of Solomon* equates the fate of righteous men generally with a Son of God specifically:

> "Let us lie in wait for **the righteous man**, be-cause ... he professes to have knowledge of God, and **calls himself a Child of the Lord**. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, be-cause his manner of life is unlike that of oth-ers, and his ways are strange ... he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and **boasts that God is his Father**. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. **Let us test him with insult and torture**, that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. **Let us condemn him to a shameful death**, for, according to what he says, he will be protected."
>
> Thus they reasoned, **but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hope for the wages of holi-ness, nor discern the prize for blameless souls**; for God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eter-nity, but through the Devil's envy death enter-ed the world, and those who belong to his party experience it. But the souls of the right-eous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the fool-ish they only **seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an aff-liction, and their going from us to be their destruction**; but they are at peace.[49]

This plainly says that a Son of God will be humiliated and killed, just as the righteous man is generally. But then "the righteous man who had died will condemn the ungodly who are living" (*Wisdom of Solomon* 4:16) and "then shall the Just One with great assurance confront his oppressors." Upon "seeing this, they shall be shaken with dreadful fear, and amazed," and they will say "This is he whom once we held as a laughingstock and as a type for mockery, fools that we were! His life we accounted madness,

and his death dishonored. See how he is accounted among the Sons of God! How his lot is with the Saints!" (5:1-5). And so we see again that Jews were already being influenced by lessons and texts like these before Christianity even got started, and we can plainly see how the values espoused here align perfectly with the Christian message about Jesus.

Holding says the content of *Wisdom of Solomon* 2 "would imply that Jesus, if he were indeed just, ought to have been delivered from his punishment," but Holding is reading the words of the *wicked* and mistaking them as advice to the *righteous*, and consequently he misses the point of the text: that God will *not* deliver Jesus until the *resurrection*. Holding seems to think the text tells the reader that God "will help him and deliver him from the hand of his enemies," but verse 2:21 says those who claimed this "were deceived, for their own wickedness had blinded them." Holding apparently misses the exact parallel with Mark 15:29-32 (which develops Psalms 22:7-8), where the wicked yet again say they expect God to save his Son, and are yet again deceived into imagining this, blinded by their wickedness. Otherwise, it is certainly true—and I consistently concede the point throughout my critique—that Christians still had to offer some evidence that Jesus was the one raised. But the issue is whether they needed "irrefutable" evidence. And I find they did *not* (as shown most directly in Chapters 7, 13, and 17, but also in Chapters 4, 6, and 10).

So there is a flaw in Holding's reasoning. Yes, a man who "out of the blue" was crucified and then declared God would not win many supporters. But this did not come out of the blue. Rather, a large number of people had been prepared by the Jewish scriptures to expect that someone would suffer a most humiliating execution at the hands of the wicked elite, despite his complete innocence, and that this person would be the Chosen One of God, a Son of God, who would receive the ultimate elevation in heavenly honor, soon to return and impose his revenge on the wicked and bring salvation to the faithful. The soil was prepared for exactly what the Christians came to preach—in fact, this preparation no doubt contributed significantly to *why* the first Christians came to believe this amazing claim about Jesus in the first place. The scriptures predicted that around that very time an innocent man would be humiliated with execution and scorn and this man, scripture plainly said, would be the Messiah. Jesus was supposedly an innocent man humiliated with execution and scorn.

That would have made him a good candidate. Holding's argument requires that the evidence must be overwhelming, but in fact by being crucified Jesus would already fit the bill—so it would not take much to convince his followers that he was more than merely a candidate for the title of Christ.

This is confirmed by the fact that scriptural demonstrations were one of the main modes of successful argument employed by the Christians (as I'll show in Chapter 13). Even to the extent that the Christians developed novel interpretations, the fact that they found such meaning in these revered oracles could and often did carry tremendous weight. The relevant point here is that prophetic preparation for a crucified messiah made sure that preaching a crucified messiah would not be a black mark, but a useful tactic, even a feather in Christianity's cap—among many Jews, certainly, but also among some Jewish sympathizers who were already acquainted with and impressed by their scriptures, and even among some unprepared Gentiles. Throughout the ancient world a great many people were awed by oracles of the gods and sought prophecy at innumerable places around the Empire. They were also well-acquainted with the idea of finding predictions of current events in "sacred scriptures." The Roman state consulted the *Sibylline Books*, for example.[50] Thus, to convert an unprepared Gentile merely required introducing him to the relevant texts and explaining how the story of Jesus confirms them. The fact that a humiliated, crucified man becoming a god (as all Heavenly Kings and Sons of God were) was *predicted* by ancient sacred texts would be a powerful argument in favor of belief. It's no accident that the Christians relied on that very argument.

Conclusion

Holding's point here only works to explain why certain groups and individuals rejected Christianity. It does nothing to argue against conversions from among those groups who actually did accept Christianity. For those groups included many people who would not have found anything challenging in worshipping a crucified martyr like Jesus, and some would even have found this particularly attractive, fitting both pagan and Jewish precedents, and conforming to their needs and desires within a corrupt world beyond their control. As a result, that Christianity began and succeeded by preaching a crucified god was not improbable at all, much less so improbable only a real resurrection could explain it.

2. Who Would Follow a Man from Galilee?

Two Key Problems

James Holding points out that “the Greco-Roman world was rife with what we would call prejudices and stereotypes,” and far more starkly than we are used to in our own society. That is correct, but not everyone shared the same prejudices. Thus Holding makes a false generalization when he claims that Gentiles would not listen to Christians plugging a Jewish deity. We already know that many Gentiles flocked to Judaism even before Christians came along, either converting to it, supporting it, or holding it in high esteem. We also know that Christianity was most successful in its first hundred years within exactly those groups: Diaspora Jews and their Gentile sympathizers (see Chapter 18).

Once Christianity had saturated that market apparently as far as it could (though still winning a few converts outside it), it began de-Judaizing the religion in order to make it palatable to more Gentiles. We see this process begin in the early 2nd century, and some scholars claim to see it beginning already in the Gospels or even with Paul. This move had become increasingly necessary after the two failed Jewish wars against Rome (in the 60’s and 130’s) lost the Jews a lot of their earlier support and sympathy. But, either way, the tactic worked. Christians could then claim that old advantage of persuasion: “the enemy of your enemy is your friend.” And they could begin to make their religion more philosophical, more Hellenistic, and less Jewish, all the while claiming to have rendered Judaism *obsolete*. Thus, even when its Jewishness really did become a problem, Christianity quickly found a way to overcome that handicap. Of course, Holding is right that had Christianity *remained* obstinately Jewish, it would have failed—and as a matter of fact, the original Jewish sects of Christianity *did* fail. That's why the *successful* Christian movements became increasingly un-Jewish—and why the Western Christian tradition became responsible for perpetuating the enduring bugbear of anti-Semitism.[51]

Holding does appear to concede as much, arguing only that Christianity “never should have expanded in the Gentile world much beyond the circle of those Gentiles who were already God-fearers.” Of

course, it didn't—that is, not *much* beyond—until later, once issues of evidence could no longer arise, and the successful sects began abandoning their Jewishness, even turning *against* Judaism. Even so, Christianity did make some early inroads into groups outside the category of Jews and their sympathizers, for the simple reason that Christianity made it easier to convert. A large deterrent against conversion to Judaism was its intense list of arduous social and personal restrictions and its requirement for an incredibly painful and rather dangerous procedure of bodily mutilation: circumcision (in a world with limited anesthetics and antiseptics). Once Paul abandoned those requirements for entry, he had on his hands a sect of Judaism that was guaranteed to be more popular than any previous form of it. Thus, far from Christianity's increased success being impossible, it was *guaranteed*. This doesn't mean people flocked to it in droves—but it does mean that the already significant inflow of Gentiles toward the Jewish religion was certain to become significantly greater for its Christian sect.

A second factor Holding overlooks is what Paul was doing: throughout his letters the impression is clear that he wanted to create a community that would transcend racial and social prejudices and encompass everyone, essentially ending the unwelcome strife between Rome and God's People by finding a way to unite them in peace.[52] This was to be a New Israel, a community that would realize a socialist utopia of brotherhood by its own efforts, without violence or rebellion. It would be free of the meddling influence of—and manipulation by—the corrupt Sanhedrin, Priesthood, and Rabbinate, and the Greek and Roman powers-that-be (economic, political, or military). And it would certainly not be spoiled by the very institutions that Paul saw destroying society—such as distinctions of wealth, status, and race.

Paul was fanatic about this, and made heroic efforts to push this agenda by traveling and writing letters throughout the Roman world, putting out fires and strengthening communities. He sought every means of persuasion to realize his dream ("I become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some," 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 & 10:33). Is it really so surprising that he would succeed at this? Certainly he didn't win over the world. But he was selling a very beautiful and attractive idea, and he clearly had the skills and education to package it in whatever way any given audience would find most persuasive. I think every scholar today would agree that had there been no Paul, there would have been no

Christianity as we know it. His role in rescuing Christianity from failure cannot be overlooked. If *anyone* could sell this new "Judaism Lite" to the Gentiles, it was he.

Getting the Context Right

So not only did Christianity abandon almost from the start most of the things Gentiles found distasteful about Judaism, but it benefited from one of the most industrious and skillful salesmen the ancient world ever saw. That put Christianity in at least the same standing in terms of potential success as almost every other ancient cult. Holding claims that "the Romans naturally considered their own belief systems to be superior to all others," yet the Romans were famous for accepting into their society literally every single foreign religion that crossed their doorstep—from the castrated priesthood of Attis to the cosmopolitan Egyptian cult of Isis to the Syrian sun-cult of Emperor Elegabalus, and beyond.

The examples are countless. The castrated priesthood of Attis was formally set up in the capital city of Rome by the government itself. The cosmopolitan Egyptian cult of Isis won the esteem of the otherwise-maligned Emperor Caligula and became the number one mystery religion among the Roman elite in the 2nd century, and is well-attested as far off as even the cities of Roman Britain. The Syrian sun-cult of Emperor Elegabalus was formally established in Rome even before his reign, and during his reign briefly became the official state cult. The Phrygian Mithras won the hearts of many among the legionary elite. The Greco-Chaldean theology of Neoplatonism won the minds of many of the later Roman intelligentsia. The backwater Black Sea cult of Alexander of Abonuteichos won the favor of emperors and governors. Even Judaism is an example. And so on. Sure, there were intellectuals like Seneca who were horrified by all this, or who, like Plutarch, sought to alter these foreign traditions to be more palatable, more "philosophical." Yet they could not stem the tide of elites and commoners who embraced all these diverse foreign religions all over the Roman Empire. As far as foreign cults go, Christianity had stepped into a seller's market.[53]

It is true, as Holding suggests, that Christianity was much like a 1960's-style counter-cultural movement, but that was its appeal: the Christian missionaries were meeting a new market demand, of a growing mass of the discontented. They were not successful with those well-served

by the social system. They were successful with those who were sick of that system, disgusted with it, and yet powerless to do anything about it. And observe how successful the 60's movement was, despite launching into full flower right on the wings of the most rabidly conservative McCarthy era, and facing violent opposition from every quarter. Christianity wasn't nearly as disruptive: the Christians organized no mass protests, engaged in no civil violence, dodged no drafts, and paid their taxes—indeed they didn't even advocate breaking any laws whatsoever, but submitting fully to all the authorities (see Romans 13:1-7 and discussion in Chapter 10).

As to other elements of stigma that might have dissuaded converts, we shall discuss those either below or in other chapters. But as far as the government was concerned, there was no real threat from Christians, and as a result persecution during its first hundred years, especially from the government, was unusual and typically unexpected (I cover this in Chapter 8, but the attitude of Gallio in Acts 18:12-16 was typical). For now it's enough to note that there was nothing inherently shocking about Christianity, when compared with all the other strange foreign cults that flourished then—which included numerous sects of Jews, who found their own Gentile converts or supporters.

A Working Class Rabbi

So there was nothing about being *Jewish* that prevented Christianity from achieving the small success it did in its first hundred years. But Holding offers a few other stigmas, which he claims would have handicapped it (besides still more that he assigns entire sections to, which I'll deal with in other chapters). He rightly notes that many among the snobbish elite looked down their noses at working-class occupations like carpentry, and Jesus was a carpenter—which may be a reason why Christianity won little support from the elite quarter. But other groups did not share this low opinion—and they were the ones the early Christians successfully evangelized: the working class, the poor, those who resented the rich and powerful—and, again, Jews and their sympathizers.

Jews greatly admired tradesmen, and usually expected their rabbis to master a trade. The greatest and most revered rabbis of the period had practical trades: Hillel was a woodcutter, Shammai a carpenter. This was typical throughout the great rabbinical tradition. Jehuda was a mechanic, Jose a tanner, and Jochanan the Sandaler was, as one can tell from his name, a sandal-maker.[54] Their trades are evident even in the tales told of them. For example, in the Talmud, Hillel drives someone off with a builder's cubit he happened to have in his hand.[55] Paul himself was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Does it sound like these people or their admirers would scorn the idea of revering a carpenter? Not at all.

In the Mishnah, Rabbi Gamaliel said, "Fitting is learning the Torah along with a craft, for the labor put into the two of them makes one forget sin." Indeed "all learning of Torah which is not joined with labor is destined to be null and cause sin."[56] Rabbi Jehuda said, "Whoever does not teach his son a trade teaches him robbery," a proverb almost identically embraced by pagans, as expressed by a leading Platonist, "if a man will not dig or knows no other profit-earning trade, he is clearly minded to live by stealing or robbery or begging."[57] Rabbi Shemaiah even said we should love work. Indeed, his complete declaration is more revealing: "Love work. Hate authority. Don't get friendly with the government."[58] This

expresses the attitude of exactly those for whom Christianity was most attractive. Another example of this resentment of the elite appears in Rabbi Judah's declaration that even "the best among physicians is going to Hell."[59] The Christian tale of the woman who bled for twelve years reveals a similar criticism of doctors (in Luke 8:43). We might even see this attitude in the prominent disdain held for "the scribes" as a group throughout the Gospels: this may have been a jab at men who claimed authority in the Law yet didn't hold what was considered a real working-class job. In addition to all that, *every* member of Essene communities was expected to ply a manual trade—this was part of its anti-elitist vision and one of the very reasons people joined it. And of Jewish sects, Christianity resembles the Essenes more than any other, both in its moral ideals and its consistently anti-elitist rhetoric.[60]

Christianity in the first century was most successful among Jews, as well as Gentiles who shared or were sympathetic to Jewish values. But what about outside those groups? There, Christianity was most successful among the middle and lower classes, especially targeting craftsmen and other middlemen whom the aristocracy often scorned (see Chapter 18). Obviously, tradesmen, middlemen, and the lower classes didn't look down their noses at *themselves* (see Chapter 12). In other words, outside the arena of Jewish values, Christianity was most successful among those who would *not* have looked down on a carpenter, while it was *least* successful among those who did. Therefore Holding's argument is irrelevant to what actually happened.

If logic is not enough to prove that pagan tradesmen held their own class in high esteem, we have evidence. In Lucian's account of his education (*My Dream*) he explains how his family sought to improve his prospects by buying him an apprenticeship to a stonecutter, after considering several other trades—in the course of which all his friends and family argued for the value and respectability of becoming a craftsman.[61] Tradition before the time of Christ also held that Socrates, the greatest and most admired philosopher of the ancient world, was the son of a stoneworker and a stoneworker himself (he was also, incidentally, a convicted criminal executed by the state).[62] We also have countless examples of Greek and Roman tradesmen boasting of their jobs in inscriptions and reliefs carved on their homes and tombstones, and of trade guilds boasting in public inscriptions of their recognition,

membership, or accomplishments. Clearly there had to be a substantial segment of the population that thought well of such achievements.[63]

I photographed an example myself when I visited the British Museum (see following page). This relief depicts two brothers, celebrating their achievement of freedom (the symbols of their manumission from slavery are shown on the left hand side) as well as their professions: the tools of a smith or minter are depicted above their heads, and the tools of a carpenter to the right.[64] They were clearly proud of their trades and went to considerable expense to boast of them. They would not have bothered if no one was going to admire them for it. Therefore, the profession of Jesus would not have been a major barrier to conversion. To the contrary, among those the Christians actually evangelized, it was often an asset—and for some Jews it would have been a *requirement*.

Nor was it thought odd to worship a god who held a lower-class occupation. Hephaestus was a blacksmith, Orpheus a musician, Pollux a boxer, and Romulus a shepherd, while some gods were “humiliated” by being sent to earth to be enslaved by human masters—hence Apollo became a shepherd and Poseidon a bricklayer.[65] Yet this did not diminish the worship of any of these deities. As even the Christian author Arnobius admits of his pagan peers:

> You represent to us the gods, some as carpen-ters, some physicians, others working in wool, as sailors, players on the harp and flute, hunters, shepherds, and, even beyond that, mere rustics.[66]

Obviously, throwing another carpenter into the mix would hardly make a difference.

This provides a particular example of J.P. Holding's incompetence (or dishonesty) as a scholar. In my original refutation I only bothered to demonstrate (and conclusively) that Jews had great respect for tradesmen and thus would not have looked down on Jesus for being a carpenter, as Holding had already falsely claimed. How did Holding respond to being so soundly refuted? By inventing the bizarre claim that *only* Jews respected tradesmen—apparently assuming that Greco-Roman tradesmen all despised themselves and each other, which is obviously ridiculous. Yet he clearly just made this up—without even bothering to check if it was true. This is typical of Holding's methods: not actually checking the facts before making a claim. Indeed, he betrayed his remarkable ignorance of ancient culture by saying "the only evidence [anyone] can find is within Judaism." Only someone who knew nothing about the ancient world, and made no effort to learn, would make so foolish a claim as that. In a similar fashion, Holding declared no one would worship a deity who worked in a lower class occupation, which is also not true—as just noted, the pagans worshipped several gods of that description. Consequently, I significantly updated my refutation to include all the evidence Holding embarrassingly claimed didn't exist (including that photograph of those working class brothers). I digress on this point merely to emphasize how unreliable and (in my opinion) dishonest some Christian scholars are, and how little J.P. Holding should ever be trusted in anything he claims about antiquity.

Another example of his desperate tactic of making things up in order to pretend he hasn't been refuted is Holding's subsequently more adamant claim that no one in antiquity had notions of improving their condition. That is equally outrageous. It is not what any of the scholars he quotes to that effect have ever argued—to the contrary, they would all be appalled by what he claims they said. So you shouldn't trust Holding. Instead, you should actually buy or borrow the books he quotes, and read them yourself. Then you will see how those scholars actually discuss the total situation very differently than Holding lets on. On this issue in particular,

the evidence is overwhelmingly against him (as I explain in Chapter 10, where I also present examples of his gross misrepresentation of the arguments of Bruce Malina). But we needn't survey the opinions of scholars. We can go to the primary evidence. And here Lucian's autobiographical account in *My Dream* again provides refutation enough: there he explains how his family sought to *improve his prospects* by buying him an apprenticeship to a stonecutter, and how Lucian in turn regarded it as far *better* an improvement in his situation to become a scholar instead. Yet according to Holding, no one in antiquity thought or acted like this. Holding simply isn't telling the truth.

To illustrate further, Holding claims that the ancient idea of "limited good" entailed that everyone would hate Christians for taking what wasn't theirs, and no one would join Christianity for the purpose of improving their access to goods (like food, friendship, or healthcare). Holding is simply wrong—and, of course, none of the sources he cites say any such thing about Christianity. They only discuss the idea of limited good as a social problem that Christianity was a response to—*not* as a barrier to Christianity's success. In contrast, Holding argues:

> Just as anachronistic is Carrier's idea that "Christian missionaries were meeting a new market demand, of a growing mass of the dis-contented." He is yet again importing mod-ernist, individualist ideas into the social world of the N[ew] T[estament]; the reality however is that "discontent" such as he imagines, though it would exist, would not be seen as solved by Christianity .... As Pilch and Malina report in *The Handbook of Biblical Social Values* [pp. 79ff], this was a world of "limited good" within which all resources were considered at a fixed value .... The "discontented" who wished to rise in the ranks, would perceive that they did so *at the expense of others*, including their fellow poor, who would have the same perception and would resent any attempt to "rise above" others. Thus in fact the ancient person regarded their lot as decided by fate; however dissatisfied they may have been, there was *nothing that they could do about it*, and any discontented person seeking resolution of the sort Carrier envisages would incur the envy and probation of their fellow in-group members. If anything, Christianity as a new-comer would be rejected as a religion trying to cut from the pie that was already distributed.

I personally asked Bruce Malina about this, and he told me himself that this is not what he argued.[67] Instead, Malina says "morality based on limited good held people back, except those devoted to greed," hence "the commonplace: every rich person was a thief or the heir of a thief," and for this reason Christianity was *attractive*, not stigmatized, because it sought to *restore* the distribution of goods according to human dignity as intended by God, rather than according to the cutthroat principles of the wider society. "I have argued," Malina wrote, "that what people wished to do was to maintain the status that they believed was proper to their kin group" and "this often entailed improving their circumstances when they were dislodged from their status."

Hence the poor were poor because of the immoral greed of the rich, not because of mere "fate." To the contrary, the very idea of limited good Malina argues for would have caused the poor to feel cheated, and then motivated them to seek to restore the piece of the pie that was already owed them—and promised them by God. As Malina told me, he thought Jews would have seen in Christianity an effort to realize God's law as established in Leviticus 25:10-55. Christianity was thus a movement widely seen as seeking to set things right—not as an attempt to "rise above" others. So nothing I argued was "anachronistic" as Holding claimed, but was in fact perfectly in accord with the social reality of the ancient world. As Malina himself says, the ancients *did* believe they could do something about their lot, Christianity *was* seen by many as a solution to the inequities of society, and its efforts to restore equity were not resented by anyone but the *greedy, thieving rich*.

Holding thus misrepresents what his own sources say, in order to declare as fact the exact opposite of what they said. I have a hard time seeing that as anything but dishonest. The bottom line is: there was nothing improbable about a working class god being worshipped, especially by working class people. Hence this was no barrier to Christianity's success. To the contrary, it was an asset among those it successfully recruited, who saw in Christianity a way to answer one of their most nagging complaints about the world: it's widespread social and economic injustice. That this was part of what made Christianity attractive (and thus successful among those who converted in its early decades of evangelism) will become evident here and in subsequent chapters.

Holding attempted to challenge this by strangely asking what *kerygma* (gospel message) I imagine the Christian missionaries taught, even though I explicitly discuss this in several places, and never do I mention “justice and contentment” in those contexts. He apparently means to argue against the fact that Christianity was attractive because it was a movement of moral and social justice, by somehow mistaking the reason it was attractive with the actual way it was sold. I never make that mistake myself. I consistently argue that the Christian *kerygma* was from the very beginning exactly as Holding wants it to be: that Christ died for our sins and rose again and all who join him will be saved. The question my critique here sets out to answer is why anyone believed this message, and I certainly find (along with many other scholars, even those Holding himself cites) that the moral and material benefits of membership were among those reasons (as following chapters will show). The question of why the first Christians sought to attach this moral message to that *kerygma* is a question whose answer has little bearing on Holding’s thesis, since his argument concerns why the message would sell, not where it came from or how it was packaged.[68] Just as modern advertisers sell their products with sex or appeals to ‘popular values’, the Christians sold their gospel by attaching it to moral and social values *they* believed were popular (among those social groups they didn’t already despise).

The Galilean Connection

The most important stigma Holding brings up in this context, since he names an entire section after it, is the fact that Jesus came from the Idaho of Judea: the most hick-and-bumpkin county of Galilee. He summarizes the point very well, worth quoting in full:

> Christianity had a serious handicap ... the stig-ma of a savior who undeniably hailed from Galilee—for the Romans and Gentiles, not only a Jewish land, but a hotbed of political sedition; for the Jews, not as bad as Samaria of course, but a land of yokels and farmers without much respect for the Torah, and worst of all, a savior from a puny village of no account [i.e. Nazareth]. Not even a birth in Bethlehem, or Matthew's suggestion that an origin in Galilee was prophetically ordained, would have unattached such a stigma: Indeed, Jews would not be convinced of this, even as today, unless something else first convinced them that Jesus was divine or the Messiah.

Of course, even by the Christians' own inflated numbers in Acts, few Palestinian Jews *were* convinced (see Chapter 18). But besides that, hasty generalizations abound here. Yes, most of the Jewish elite, especially snobs (most notably, those who would feel threatened by the popularity of *any* outsider, Galilean or not, gaining moral authority among the people), would balk and snipe at the origins of Jesus. And yes, maybe some Jews would snobbishly or naïvely expect a messiah to hail from a famous city, just as they expected him to hail from royal blood (and the Christians did struggle to assert just such a claim for Jesus).

But most of those receiving Paul's mission would have had neither prejudice. Among Gentiles, most by far would know nothing of a past Galilean rebellion, nor would a rebellion be any stigma for those who disliked the Roman order. Among Diaspora Jews, Galilee was nevertheless part of the Holy Land of Israel, and that was always more prestigious than not. In fact, along with Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and a dozen or more others, there was a distinct sect of Rabbis that originated and held

authority in Galilee. Holding's premise that "seditious lands" produced a stigma is also questionable. Italy rebelled against Rome barely a century before, in the Social War of 90 B.C., and Asia Minor followed soon after that in the Mithradatic Wars of the 80's, yet neither territory was stigmatized for it—so why should Galilee have been? There is no evidence it was.[69]

Nor was Galilee such a disrespected hick region, as some have claimed. Apart from the disagreements between Galileans and Pharisees attested in the Talmud (which were no more derisive than those between Pharisees and Sadducees), within the first hundred years of the Christian mission we have no actual criticism or disdain for the region of Galilee from *any* source except the Gospel of John. So also for Nazareth, which was not the tiny hovel it's often made out to be. A Jewish inscription from the 2nd or 3rd century confirms that Nazareth was one of the towns that took in Jewish priests after the destruction of the Temple in 66 A.D. Would priests deign to shack up in a despised hick town? And archaeology confirms it may have had a significant stone building before then (perhaps the synagogue claimed to be there in Luke 4:16). Nazareth definitely had grain silos, cisterns, ritual immersion pools, smartly-cut cave dwellings and storerooms, a stone well, and a significant necropolis also cut from the rock of Nazareth's hill, all in the time of Jesus. This was no mere hamlet, but a village inhabited by hundreds experiencing significant economic success.[70]

For example, four calcite column bases were recovered at Nazareth, which were reused in a later structure, but are themselves dated before the Jewish War (66-70 A.D.) by their stylistic similarity to Roman and synagogue structures throughout 1st century Judea, and by the fact that they contain Nabatean lettering (which suggests construction before Jewish priests migrated to Nazareth after the war), as well as their cheap material (calcite instead of marble). Aramaic-inscribed marble fragments have also been found there, paleographically dated around the end of the 1st century or early 2nd century, demonstrating that Nazareth had marble structures near the time the Gospels were written (even if not before). Otherwise, very little of Nazareth has been excavated, and therefore no argument can be advanced regarding what "wasn't" there in the 1st century. All the more so, since evidence suggests any stones and bricks used in first century buildings in Nazareth were reused in later structures,

thus erasing much of the evidence.[71] There simply isn't any case to be made that it was a despised or insignificant hovel.

In contrast, the Gospel of John is *alone* in having anyone declare anything like the concern of Nathanael: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Yet Nathanael is not mentioned in any other Gospel, nor in Acts—so he was either not a real person, or not a very important one in Christian memory. And yet, even according to John, this lone snob is converted after a single conversation with Jesus, while Jesus still lived, and *not* by any evidence of his resurrection after he died (John 1:47-49). Since the only man on record scorning a Nazarene origin was still open to the possibility that Jesus was the Christ, and then fairly easily convinced of it, it follows that hailing from Nazareth was no great barrier to conversion, nor was anything like evidence of his resurrection required to overcome that barrier.

Likewise, though Josephus mentions Galilee a total of 158 times in his entire opus, *not a single mention* contains any hint that the region was looked down upon in the Roman period. In fact, it was the recipient of great honors under Herod: he lavished building projects on "Sepphoris, the security of all Galilee," which received the coveted and prestigious status of "metropolis," and he chose to build the great city of Tiberias there, in the very lifetime of Jesus.[72] Herod would not insult Emperor Tiberius by choosing to build and name a new city after him in a scorned backwater. Josephus also reports that Galilee had 240 cities and villages, and was renowned for its prodigious oil production, and the governorship of Galilee was highly coveted—for a time Josephus was governor of Galilee himself, and he certainly appears to have been proud of it.[73]

Even the respected Jewish sage and scholar Eleazar the Galilean came from there. Indeed, the very fact that there *was* a Galilean scholar famous enough for us to know of him proves Galilee was no hick backwater. Eleazar was also famous for converting the Gentile King Izates to Judaism during the reign of Claudius—exactly when Paul was preaching Christ. So hailing from Galilee did not turn off even well-informed kings.[74] Finally, Josephus records that, combined with Perea, Galilee produced 200 talents in tribute a year, a substantial sum (nearly six tons of silver or gold), and most of that came from Galilee. In fact, measured in terms of wealth and number of major cities, Perea was far *more* a hick backwater than Galilee. When Herod Antipas received Galilee

& Perea as his tetrarchy, he lived and set up his administration in Galilee, thus demonstrating its greater prestige, and when he held a birthday banquet for himself, it was the leading men of Galilee who were invited—we hear no mention of “leading men of Perea” (e.g. Mark 6:21). And yet the revered John the Baptist hailed from and preached in Perea. So coming from a hick backwater was clearly no barrier to prestige or respect.[75]

The Gospel of John

So why is the Gospel of John the only source we have from the period that denigrates Galilee? Probably for exactly the *opposite* reason Holding thinks: John included that material *deliberately*, to exploit the disdain people have for elite snobbery. By playing up the snobbish rejection of any message from Galilee or any prophet from a small rural town, John is playing on popular disdain for exactly such attitudes. His audience would see the Jewish elite in his story the same way someone from a small, wholesome town in upstate New York sees Manhattanite snobs who despise anyone not from "the Big Apple."

Indeed, the Republican Party in the United States often plays the "small town of mom and apple pie" against the "decadent New York elite" in exactly the same way John does. "See how they look down their noses at you? Don't you hate that? So don't follow them—follow us! We're the party of the common man, of true family values against the hypocrisy and corruption of the big city snobs!" That message resonated even more strongly then than it does today—and yet the same rhetoric still works today. It would have worked even better then. Christianity was originally a movement for the poor and the disgruntled middle-class. It preached to the very people who despised the Jerusalemite snobbery that John went out of his way to depict. So representing the Jerusalem elite as despising the origins of Jesus actually *helped* the Gospel. It didn't hurt it. Having a hero from a "small town" would be a big sell—it held out an alternative to elite snobbery: a hero just like the average man, who, just like the average man, suffered under the heel of these big-town jerks.

This is clear from the way John uses this material, repeated in no other Gospel. Nor are any of the key characters ever mentioned in any other source, not even Acts. Consider John 7:41-52:

> Some said, "This is the Christ." But others said, "What, does the Christ come out of Galilee? Doesn't scripture say the Christ will come from the seed of David, and from Beth-lehem, the village where David was?" So there arose a division in the multitude because of

> him. And some of them would have seized him, but no man laid hands on him.

Already John is saying that though some rejected Jesus on these snobbish grounds, many were *not* dissuaded by that fact—enough in fact to create a "division" and prevent the Jewish officials from seizing Jesus. So the argument was not that effective against accepting Jesus. And John's audience is meant to sympathize with those people who *rejected* this elitist argument. This is clear from the way the story continues:

> The officers therefore came to the chief priests and Pharisees, but they said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" The officers answered, "No one told us to." The Pharisees therefore answered them, "Are you also led astray? Have any of the rulers believed in him, or of the Pharisees? But this multitude that doesn't know the law and are accursed!"

In other words, John is using the fact that the elite (the rulers and Pharisees) rejected the message of Christianity *as a point in its favor* (which means it must also have been true). John was in effect arguing to the reader, "You common folk, see how they denigrate you, and say you are ignorant and accursed?" Thus, John attests not only to the fact that it's the *non*-elites who are converting to Christianity (not the snobs whom Holding quotes), but also the fact that this was the very reason they were converting: they despised attitudes like that of the Pharisees depicted here, and John is using that anger as a means to persuade them of the merits of the Christian message.

This is proven by the speech that John now includes in this narrative (in the mouth of Nicodemus, a Pharisee that John alone portrays as gradually coming over to Jesus's side in 3:1-9, 7:51, and 19:39):

> Nicodemus (who came to [Jesus] before, and was now one of [his followers]) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it first hears from him and knows what he does?" They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search, and see that out of Gal-ilee no prophet arises."

Nicodemus thus champions the enlightened ideal of justice ("He who decides a case without hearing the other side, even if he decides justly, cannot be considered just," Seneca, *Medea* 199), against the very corrupting prejudice the Pharisees are expressing here. To understand how a reader of John would react to this passage, think of it in a modern context:

> **Snob:** "He's from Idaho. No great scholar has ever come from Idaho."
>
> **Righteous Man:** "What, are we going to judge him before we even know what he's act-ually said and done?"
>
> **Snob:** "You must be from Idaho!"

The insulting fallacy of responding to a valid call for the just and equal treatment of everyone, by accusing the one who makes that call of being a hick themselves, is exactly the sort of thing that enraged the lower classes back then, as it does today. John is getting the audience on his side, and turning them against the Jewish elite. We'll examine this class conflict further in Chapter 12.

So the fact that Jesus hailed from Galilee was no barrier to Christian success. On the contrary, among those who actually did convert, it would have been either irrelevant or an actual asset, considering Galilee was not really so scorned a place, but especially considering how authors like John exploited so effectively what scorn there was, using the very prejudice Holding points to, as a weapon in Christianity's *favor*. Indeed, the entire Gospel of John is crafted to appeal to that universal human tendency toward reactionary anti-elitism described so well by Richard Hofstadter in the context modern America (though in that case with different social causes). Accordingly, Richard Rohr-baugh concludes from a survey of scholarship on John:

> John is almost certainly a Galilean gospel ... [aimed at] a group which exists within a dom-inant society but as a conscious alternative to it, [in particular] an alienated group which had been pushed (or withdrawn) to the social mar-gins where it stood as a protest to the values of the larger society.[76]

That's the very target audience who would side with Nicodemus, not the other Pharisees. Holding's argument would be correct—for many Pharisees, but not for those who shared the view expressed by Nicodemus. And those were the people Christianity successfully evangelized, far more successfully than the Jewish elite, as even the Gospel of John admits.

To be more correct, it wasn't necessarily the actual values of the wider society that Christians set themselves against, but the actual or perceived corruption of those values by the elite and their supporters (as I'll argue in Chapter 10). That there was a major conflict of values and expectations between the upper and lower classes (as I've argued) is obvious to any expert in Roman history, and is now the consensus view.[77] Of course, instead of open rebellion in this case, there "is a mode of resistance" which "may take the form" of "passive symbiosis," which is exactly what the Christian Church did.[78]

Clearly, snobbery against the Galilean or Nazarene origins of Jesus would, at worst, have had no effect on the actual success Christianity experienced in its first century of growth, and at best would even have *improved* that success, by making it *more* attractive to a much larger segment of the population, rather than less so.

Holding Steps into a Trap

What I've said on the status of Nazareth and Galilee remains unrefuted. Nevertheless, Holding tried to defend his unsupported assertions by twisting what I said with even more unsupported assertions, and adding groundless insults against my competence, all the while ignoring the actual point: that there is *no evidence whatsoever of any prejudice or disdain toward Galilee or Nazareth* except a single remark in the Christian Gospel of John, which is cunningly used to *denounce* such prejudice as a conceit of the arrogant elite. Everything I said on that subject stands. But examining how Holding tries to skirt this issue with bluff and innuendo provides a good example of his typical, and arguably dishonest tactics.

First, as to priests moving to Nazareth within thirty years of the time of Christ, Holding tries to dismiss this as an inscription a hundred years too late—even though it documents an event only thirty years after the time of Christ. Holding then tries to dismiss it by claiming "it is clear that prejudices would at times have to take a back seat to practicality," even though this makes no sense in this case, for there were numerous major cities in Galilee—and elsewhere in Judea *outside* Galilee—where priests could have gone. So there was no practical necessity here. Why would they even think of moving to Nazareth? Clearly they had no prejudice against it. His offered idea that they went there to "teach" the Nazarenes is completely an invention of Holding's imagination, and yet even if it were true, it would only prove my point: they clearly thought well enough of the Nazarenes to honor them with their time, attention, education, and even their residence. And this is no small matter for Holding: for it entails that they thought it fitting to *join the group*. Holding argues *ad nauseum* that to know a person's home was to know *them*—which if true would entail that no priest would dare "become" a Nazarene, for then all the stigma attached to Nazarenes would attach to him. Holding thus traps himself in a Catch-22 from which there is no escape. No matter how you spin it, there could not have been any great stigma attached to becoming a Nazarene.

Holding also claims I'm "confused" if I suppose that major stone structures "somehow lifted the social status of Nazareth in the eyes of

outsiders," but all he has to back up this claim is a ridiculous analogy from modern times—even though Holding otherwise constantly berates *me* for imposing "modern" ideas on past cultures. So it seems he's the one who is confused. (I don't really do what he accuses me of, but he does. No surprise there.) The fact remains that no town would have major stone structures *in the ancient world* unless it possessed or received some wealth, and that entailed some measure of status. True, it was no Sepphoris or Tiberias. But it was no despised hick town, either, and Holding is still wrong to claim so. And that's the bottom line. Holding cannot present any evidence that Nazareth was despised by ordinary people. John gives us the only hint of prejudice at all, and that solely from the elite (a prejudice John's narrative *condemns*). And for Galilee, we find no hint of this prejudice in Josephus, who was himself an elite and who wrote about Galilee extensively—yet never once do we hear anything about anyone's disdain for it. Clearly, if there was any such disdain, it was not common enough to remark upon, and Josephus himself did not share it.

Holding then steps into a trap. He responded by saying that "line 390" in the *Life* of Josephus, which I originally cited, contains "nothing" about what I argue, that in line 228 "nothing is said about the governorship of Galilee," and that *Jewish War* 2.590 refers "only" to "the repairing of a wall." From all of this, Holding mistakenly claims that "Carrier clearly hopes that no one will check these references." Yet in saying this, Holding proves he is not a skilled researcher and has no competent knowledge of the sources he is working with. The fact is, I made a small mistake in writing down the numbers of my source citations in that one endnote (which I then corrected). But the error was so small that had Holding actually read the *paragraph*, not the line, in each case he would have seen that the material I referred to *is* there.

The fact that he didn't do so simple a check as this proves that Holding is just mining his sources and doing the absolute minimum to prove his case *instead of honestly and seriously studying the sources and making sure his claims are correct*. Holding doesn't read Josephus. He just jumps to single sentences that help his case—not even caring if there are any other sentences that hurt his case. And while I knew the facts, and *then* took the trouble of tracking down the exact references, Holding is completely ignorant of the facts, and therefore incapable of tracking them

down. Instead, he just uses what he wants and ignores the rest—the truth be damned.

In fact, the truth is apparently so irrelevant to J.P. Holding that when he can't find facts to help him, he just makes them up, as we've already seen above. His dismissal of my Eleazar the Galilean example is another case. He tries to discredit this example by asserting that "in order to become a scholar, he had to leave Galilee and be tutored, very likely in the prestigious city of Jerusalem." There is no basis whatever for this claim. Holding just made it up, out of the blue. How does Holding know there were no schools in Galilee? He doesn't. He just asserts it. Since the sources say there was a sect of rabbis called the Galileans, who were often at odds with the Jerusalem rabbis, it is simply incredible to think that these Galileans went to schools in Jerusalem. And even if you think it plausible, there is still no evidence that any of them did, and no evidence that Eleazar did, or even would have. But J.P. Holding "can't" be wrong, so he gets to make up any "facts" he wants to secure his case.

That isn't the only dirty tactic Holding employs. He also moves the goal posts. For example, Holding also claims Eleazar is irrelevant because "no one was ever asked to worship this man," but that has nothing to do with the fact that Holding claimed a Galilean would be looked down upon and never revered—Eleazar refutes that very prediction, therefore the prediction is false. Instead of admitting that I refuted his claim, he pretends he made a completely different claim. The fact is, whether anyone would "worship" Eleazar would depend on other factors *apart* from his origin—in other words, where someone came from didn't matter, so long as there were reasons to worship him. Holding can't challenge that conclusion, so he tries to pretend it doesn't affect his case. But it does. *Holding* is the one who claimed there was an insurmountable prejudice against Galileans. I proved him wrong. So now he pretends his now-refuted argument didn't matter. Maybe it doesn't. But it was still wrong, and therefore no longer supports his case.

The Role of Messianic Prophecy

At the same time, an origin in both Galilee *and* Nazareth was exploited by some Christian evangelists in another way: as confirming that Jesus was the Christ. This is the tactic employed by Matthew, who tells us that the Christ *had* to come from Nazareth, "that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, that he shall be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23). Although no such prophecy can be found in the extant text of the Bible, there was no canon at the time, and we don't know what texts Matthew's audience may have relied on or how they interpreted them. Some scholars think Matthew may have meant the prophecies that the Messiah would be rejected (as shown in Chapter 1), in which case Matthew's tactic is identical to John's—exploiting the lowly origins of Jesus as a rhetorical advantage.[79] Matthew also claims (even more credibly) that prophecy predicted a messiah who would come from "Galilee of the Gentiles," a land that was "previously held in contempt, but later made glorious" (Isaiah 9:1), and that he would preach out of the Galilean city of Capernaum (as in fact all the Gospels depict him doing).[80] Yet Capernaum is among the least prestigious cities of Galilee. So prophecy did *not* anticipate a messiah from a prestigious city, undermining Holding's premise that everyone would expect such an origin.

Against this point, Holding argues that the Christians could still claim this prophetic "Galilee" connection and yet place the birth of Jesus "in Sepphoris or even Capernaum" for the prestige it afforded, rather than Nazareth. But such a conjecture carries little weight. First, there is no reason anyone had to expect the messiah would come from anywhere but, at most, Bethlehem (e.g. John 7:41-42)—and the only sources we have on Jesus' place of birth make every effort to place it precisely there (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:1-7). The prophetic anticipation of a messiah from Capernaum does not specify birth, but the light of glory, and accordingly all the Gospels place the origin of the *Gospel* there. Second, as we've seen (here and in Chapter 1), all evidence shows that the Messiah was *expected* to be a despised person from Galilee. No prophecy expected a messiah from anywhere prestigious, apart from Bethlehem.

And third, Holding's conjecture assumes the Christians were eager to lie—which assumes too much, since his entire case depends on the premise that the Christians only told the *truth* (or at least told enough truth for him to rely on their records for making his case). It may be that Holding's point still carries weight against those who argue Jesus is a fiction. One might dispute even that, but I see no need to here. It might be true that in such a case a better place of origin would have been contrived for him. After all, once we grant that the Christians were fabricating, then we could presume that an origin at Nazareth might not have occurred to them (though an origin in Galilee would, per Isaiah 9:1-2). But Holding must suppose the Christians told the truth about his origins, so the prospect of inventing a better one is excluded. And for a real hero, his story (true or not) would far outweigh in its persuasiveness any trifle over where he came from—as it did for John the Baptist and Rabbi Eleazar.

We have seen already from the evidence above that had Jesus really come from a small town in a lesser county of Judea, telling the truth about that would not have impeded the Christian mission at all, at least among those who would readily sympathize with the rural and middle-class roots of this Hero of the Masses. To be snobbish about where you came from (or what you did for a living) was, indeed, the very kind of thing the Christians despised about the social system they found themselves in, and the very thing they were seeking to escape by creating their own community where all would be equal. This was their intended audience, and for them a Nazarene hero, indeed a hard-working carpenter who didn't live off the backs of others, would not be a difficult sell.

Why a Virgin Birth?

Finally, almost as an afterthought, Holding raises the issue of Jesus's parentage, asking: "How hard would it have been to take an 'adoptionist' Christology and give Jesus an indisputably honorable birth" instead of making the harder-to-sustain claim that he was fathered by God? Of course, many Christians did exactly that, i.e. preached some form of adoptionism. Indeed, it's not clear that Paul preached anything to the contrary, and he certainly makes no mention of anything but an ordinary birth into the Davidic line. So it cannot be said that Christianity's initial success had to be despite a claim to virgin birth—the jury is still out on when that idea entered the tradition. But Holding's question can be reframed as: "Why would later Christians (like the author of Luke) add to the package something that would be harder to sell?" One reason is that an incarnated god was actually *easier* to sell to Gentiles than the more difficult idea of an Anointed, who was "Son of God" only in a particular esoteric sense intelligible mainly to Jews. I'll address that issue in Chapter 9.

But presuming the Christians *wanted* to believe (and hence to preach) that Christ was both a man and a god incarnate, there is no other way the story *could* have sold except by positing a virgin birth to an unmarried woman—and thus the need for these circumstances nullifies any difficulty this idea would pose to persuading mockers. This is because Jesus could *only* have been God Incarnate if he was *not* fathered by a human being, while his divine patrimony could only be defended if his mother was, by law, a virgin when she conceived. Besides those requirements, to be the first-born son was the most socially admired, and a virgin conceiving is both a miraculous testimony to his divinity and the best way to gain the Christians the rhetorical advantage of prophetic confirmation.

Thus we find an explicit reference to the prophesy of his virgin birth as evidence Jesus was the Christ in Matthew 1:23, and also in Justin Martyr, who reports the pagans already believed Perseus was born of a virgin (and thus were clearly open to the idea).[81] Obviously, the more

miraculous his birth, the more persuasive a hero's claim to divinity (as we know from many cases). Though, as with all the scriptural passages the Christians used to persuade people Jesus was the Christ, Jewish opponents could claim they were interpreting them incorrectly.[82] But this was a problem faced by *every* sect of Judaism: the central issue in their debates was always the interpretation of contended passages in scripture, leaving victory to whomever was the more persuasive, which differed depending on their audience—which is why Judaism hadn't unified itself on how to interpret scripture. Different views always had their loyal adherents. The Christians simply found theirs.

Although the whole idea of the virgin birth would, as Holding suspects, add ammunition to Christian enemies, it would at the same time add appeal to those groups who were more sympathetic to the idea of a Divine Man than a mere "Chosen One." The overall effect would be a net increase in the popularity of the cult, since more people would be impressed by a miraculously born god-man than by accusations of absurdity or illegitimacy, while those who were quicker to believe the more cynical accusations were often the very people who would never have converted anyway.

Even apart from the logical motive to make Jesus virgin-born, there could have been a historical necessity for the doctrine, at least for those who wanted or needed to believe Jesus was literally the Son of God. If Mary really was betrothed to Joseph when she conceived, and Jesus really was her first born, then she *had* to be a virgin, and therefore Jesus *had* to be virgin born. For unless Christians were going to lie, they had to argue that Mary's first child was not produced by a sexual union (since sexless conception was the only way Jesus could be fathered by God), and since Mary *was* a virgin when she married Joseph (according to Luke 1:27, and in any case if she was not a virgin, unless she was a widow or divorcee, she would have been executed for the crime of fornication per Deuteronomy 22:13-21), Jesus therefore had to be virgin born.

In his attempt at a rebuttal to this, Holding seemed to think I was referring here to the doctrine of immaculate conception ("that Christ was thus not tainted by original sin") simply because I argue that Jesus had to be virgin-born to be divine. Holding must be confused: the immaculate conception was a late Christian doctrine about the birth of *Mary*, not Jesus. It was Mary who was born without sin, so no sin would be passed on to

Jesus.[83] In other words, the virgin birth was *not* the Christian solution to the inheritance of sin, the immaculate birth of *Mary* was. Therefore, the fact that this concept came late has no bearing on the motives for having Jesus born to a virgin, which required no concern for the problem of inherited sin, and I made no mention of this problem as the reason for making Jesus virgin-born. Rather, I am arguing God could not have sex (least of all with someone else's wife) because *God* could not sin. And that's certainly true. This was not a "late" notion, but certainly a fact of the Jewish faith at the time of Jesus. Therefore, only a nonsexual conception was ideologically possible. That leaves the option of whom to magically impregnate, and there were many good reasons to prefer it be a virgin.

So the only marketable way Jesus could have been the literal son of God is if Mary was a virgin when she conceived him. And since the idea of virgin-born gods was already in the cultural atmosphere, and was self-evidently miraculous and thus "proof" of God's intervention in history in a way that would *confirm* the divinity of Jesus, there was ample motive to develop and promote the idea. This would not have hindered the actual success Christianity enjoyed. And there is no evidence it did.

Conclusion

Holding says, “What it boils down to is that everything about Jesus as a person was all wrong to get people to believe he was [a] deity—and there must have been something powerful to overcome all the stigmas.” But I’ve shown there were no stigmas relevant to the very audience the Christians successfully targeted. To the contrary, everything Holding claims made their mission harder actually made their mission *easier*—or had no significant impact on its success at all among those who did flock to the faith. What Jesus did while on earth was irrelevant to what he could do for you now that he was exalted to the highest throne in heaven, and it was the heavenly Jesus that was sold to the masses, not a mere carpenter from Galilee (as I argue in Chapters 1 and 14).

3. Was Resurrection Deemed Impossible?

The Popularity of Resurrection

James Holding's next argument is that pagans would not buy a physical resurrection of the flesh. "Indeed," he says, "among the pagans, resurrection was deemed impossible." Of course, this would be no problem for the mission to the Jews, since a great many Jews (though not all of them) already expected such a thing. But it's false anyway: many pagans believed resurrection was possible, even desirable. And those were probably the very pagans the Christians converted. Already the Jews appear to have gotten the idea of a resurrection of the flesh *from* pagans: it was a fundamental Zoroastrian belief, and throughout the Roman period Zoroastrianism was the common national religion in the Persian Empire (in practical terms, everything east of the Roman Empire up to about India). Theopompus and Eudemus of Rhodes, both Greek historians of the 4th century B.C., described this Persian belief. Theopompus wrote in particular that "according to the [Persian] Magi, men will be resurrected and become immortal, and what then exists will endure through their incantations." So the idea of a physical resurrection would be readily accepted by enough Jews and Persians to present no difficulty for the Christian message.[84]

That the Jews borrowed the idea of resurrection from Zoroastrian pagans is demonstrated not only by the fact that early Greek sources identify it as a Persian (and not a Jewish) belief, but by the fact that the Old Testament completely lacks any reference to the idea until after the Jews were exiled to cities in contact with Zoroastrianism. For example, the earliest mention of it comes from the author of Ezekiel 37, who came up with the idea only late in his career, after twelve years of captivity in Babylon (see Ezekiel 33:21). Daniel mentions it, too, yet again this book was written about events in Persia and among Zoroastrian magi— and is a 2nd century B.C. forgery anyway.[85] Likewise, the reference in Isaiah 26:19 appears in a section that modern scholars agree was heavily redacted in the postexilic period.[86] So clearly a lot of pagans were so completely okay with the idea that they even convinced the Jews of it.[87]

Even many Greco-Roman pagans flirted with the possibility of being raised from the dead.[88] We have so many stories and claims of physical resurrection within the pagan tradition that there can be no doubt the Christian claim would face no more difficulty than these tales in finding pagan believers. Herodotus records the Thracians believed in the physical resurrection of Zalmoxis, and formed a religion around it that promised eternal paradise for believers. Later on certain Italians came to believe in the resurrection of Aristeas of Proconnesus. Lucian records that the pagan Antigonus had told him: "I know a man who came to life more than twenty days after his burial, having attended the fellow both before his death and after he came to life."[89] Celsus, though himself a doubter, attested to a widespread belief in resurrected men among the pagans, rattling off a list of those whom pagans believed rose again:

> Zalmoxis in Scythia, the slave of Pythagoras; and Pythagoras himself in Italy; and Rhamp-sinitus in Egypt, whom, they say, played at dice with Demeter in Hades, and returned to the upper world with a golden napkin which he had received from her as a gift; and also Orpheus among the Odrysians, and Protesil-aus in Thessaly, and Hercules at Cape Taen-arus, and Theseus.

Later on Celsus adds to this list the aforementioned Aristeas of Proconnesus—as well as the deified Dioscuri, Asclepius (also noted below), and Dionysus.[90] Besides the Dioscuri, Pliny the Elder says *many* gods lived and died on alternating days.[91]

And that's not all. We've already discussed the resurrections of Romulus, Osiris, Adonis and Inanna as well (in Chapter 1), and we could add several mortals who were resurrected in Greek myth besides the Dioscuri, such as Eurydice and Alcestis—and in legend, Theseus. Eurydice returns from the dead but due to a flubbed promise is forced back, while Alcestis is returned to life by being either rescued or sent back from Hades, either way for selflessly exchanging her life for that of her husband.[92] Euripides wrote an entire play on the death and resurrection of Alcestis.[93] As for Theseus, the famous Athenian king was seen by soldiers resurrected and fighting on the side of the Athenians at Marathon.[94] Pausanias even says early Athenian art depicted Theseus "rising from the ground" at Marathon, only thirty years after the war.[95]

So it's plainly false to claim that no pagans would believe in a resurrection of the body, especially for a deified or divine man. Even Hercules, whose "resurrection" is usually portrayed only as an ascent to heaven, nevertheless ascended in his divine body, after its mortal material was burned away on the pyre.[96] In like fashion, Celsus reports that "a great many Greeks and Barbarians claim they have frequently seen, and still see, no mere phantom, but Asclepius himself." And not only was Asclepius a resurrected and deified mortal, but he was the preeminent "resurrector of the dead," which was a prominent reason pagans held him in such esteem. Since Justin could not deny this, he was prompted to claim that "the Devil" must have introduced "Asclepius as the raiser of the dead" in order to undermine the Christian message in advance.[97] Most famously, before his own resurrection Asclepius had raised Tyndareus from the dead.[98] Hence Aristides, a devout follower of Asclepius, simply assumed his pagan audience believed a god might be able to resurrect a dead man.[99]

It goes well beyond this. Lucian and Apuleius both report the common belief that resurrecting the dead ("calling moldy corpses to life," as Lucian mockingly put it) was one of the expected powers of a sorcerer, and sorcery was very popular among the majority of pagans. Hence Apuleius has his fictional sorcerer Zatchlas raise Telephron from the dead. But among 'historical' claims, Apuleius relates a 'medical' resurrection performed by Asclepiades. Apollonius of Tyana was also believed to have raised a girl from the dead using a spell. In the 4th century B.C. Heraclides of Pontus recorded that through some mysterious art Empedocles "preserved the body of a lifeless woman without pulse or respiration for thirty days" and then "he sent away the dead woman alive." Proclus reports that Eurynous of Nicopolis was "buried before the city by his relatives" but then "returned to life following the fifteenth day of his burial" and lived many more years, and that Rufus of Philippi, a pagan high priest, "died and returned to life on the third day," living long enough to tell his amazing story.[100]

Pliny the Elder reports there were numerous such tales believed by many people, even without magic. He says Varro reported on two different occasions seeing "a person carried out on a bier to burial who returned home on foot," besides witnessing the apparent resurrection of his own uncle-in-law Corfidius. Pliny also reports that the sailor Gabienus had his throat cut "and almost severed" yet returned from the dead that evening, to

report on his visit to Hades. Plato records a similar story related by Alcinous about Er the Pamphylian, who “was slain in battle” and ten days later his body was recovered and brought home, then “at the moment of his funeral, on the twelfth day, as he lay upon the pyre, he revived” and “after coming to life he related what he said he’d seen in the world beyond.” In a similar story, the Syrian commander Bouplagus rises from the dead on a body-strewn battlefield (despite having been stabbed twelve times) as Roman soldiers were looting the bodies, and chastised the Romans for looting the dead. The Lady Philinnion returned to life to visit her lover. The villainous Aridaeus fell to his death but returned to life “on the third day” to relate his trip to heaven, and was so transformed by what he learned there that he led a life of impeccable virtue thereafter. Timarchus spent two nights and a day in a sacred crypt, during which time he died, visited heaven, and returned. Ultimately, Pliny the Elder says he also knew of “cases of persons appearing after burial” but chose not to discuss them because his book was about “works of nature, not prodigies.” This nevertheless proves such tales were transmitted and believed by many people. Pliny himself doesn’t say what he believed, only that these stories weren’t the subject of his book. But he still records numerous returns from death, and as we’ve seen there are many, many more.[101]

There were also legends and stories of people resurrected by magic herbs.[102] There appears to have been a popular belief that the Emperor Nero would or did return from the dead.[103] Several cases of “ghosts” returning from the grave are also recorded where the “ghost” clearly had a physical body.[104] Resurrection was actually a common theme in pagan sacred fiction.[105] Petronius even made fun of that theme by having his hero embark on a pilgrimage to “resurrect” his impotent penis, and Plutarch mentions a play attended by Vespasian in which a dog played at dying and rising again from the dead.[106]

The great abundance of these tales reflects a widespread hope within the pagan community of returning to life, or at the very least refutes any notion that this was always thought to be “impossible.” The evidence is overwhelming: that one could return to life in the body that died, or in an even better body, was a commonplace belief among a great many pagans, and was not deemed “impossible” except by a few skeptical elites (such as the Epicureans). What matters here is not what the true events were behind all these stories of resurrected men and women. What matters is that many

people clearly believed these were genuine risings from the dead, or that such a thing could and did happen, or was something they could imagine happening. Nor does it matter how much any of these stories resemble that of Jesus (also a demigod, being the divine son of a god), for the relevant underlying concept remains the same: returning to life in a body. Therefore, J.P. Holding cannot maintain there was any significant resistance to the Christian claim among those pagans who actually did convert. To the contrary, Christians would have found a large and ready audience eager to believe just such a thing. Any differences there may have been between the many and varied pagan ideas of resurrection and what the Christians taught (which itself varied according to sect) were all minor points of metaphysical detail, not fundamental barriers to the idea of Jesus returning bodily from the dead.

Defending the Zoroastrian Connection

This is irrefutable. Nevertheless, Holding tries. For instance, he debates whether the Zoroastrians got the idea of resurrection from the Jews, rather than vice versa, even though Zoroastrians were still pagans, and their resurrection belief was already known to the Greeks and Romans by the time of Christ. But Holding presents no valid evidence for his case. He claims Daniel was written before the 4th century B.C., when in fact (as already noted) all objective scholars now agree it's a forgery produced in the 2nd century B.C., which leaves Ezekiel as the first Jew ever to mention the doctrine. But Ezekiel wrote from captivity within Babylon (Ezekiel 1:1), where Zoroastrianism was already spreading. Only then did he start writing about resurrection, after twelve years of captivity.[107] So nowhere, ever, in the entire Old Testament is the doctrine clearly advocated or mentioned until *after* the Jews were held in captivity for over ten years within a culture influenced by Zoroastrian beliefs. That's a remarkable coincidence—unless the Jews got the idea from their pagan captors. That the doctrine was attested in Greek sources as early as the 4th century B.C., and there identified as Persian (not Jewish), also argues for this conclusion. Nothing argues for the reverse.

That the Jews adapted and modified the belief to suit their own ideological preconceptions and cultural needs is irrelevant—because that is how syncretism always works. To be influenced does not mean borrowing an exact copy of someone else's idea. But that the Jews were influenced by Persian beliefs is the most obvious explanation of the facts: not only did they pick up the notion of resurrection there, and mold it to their own faith, but they also picked up the idea of a fiery hell and an eschatological war between Good and Evil (re-cast as God and Satan). These are fundamental to Zoroastrianism—the entire religion is founded on them, unlike Judaism, which is not. And these beliefs are described in the very pre-Christian reports from Theopompus that Holding himself cites from Plutarch and that I cite from Laertius, so it's impossible they could have come to Zoroastrianism from Christianity. Yet these are *also* absent from the Old Testament prior to the Persian exile. Indeed, even in

the early postexilic text of Job, Satan is still an angel in the service of God, and God alone is the ultimate author of evil.

Holding blindly asserts that the Jews would not "borrow" a religious belief from their captors, but this ignores every precedent (didn't many Jews, like Philo, "borrow" religious ideas from their Greek conquerors?), as well as the reality of ancient cultural belief systems. What the Persians believed *their* god would do for them was not seen as a rival religious dogma, but as a power that a supreme god obviously should have, and as a better view of the nature of the universe. This would appear to the Jews like any other improvement in "knowledge," no different from what they found in astronomy or zoology, and thus just as adaptable to their own beliefs about God—in exactly the same way post-exilic Jews adopted astrology from their Chaldaean captors (another obvious example of borrowing). Indeed, the Persian eschatological ideas of how their god would set things right in the end fit perfectly with what the Jews needed to restore faith in their own beliefs in the face of utter defeat—and by claiming it was *their* god who would do this, they could even claim superiority over their captors (as the book of Daniel explicitly aims to do, through prophecies and miracles that 'show up' the Persian magi).

So much for the general point. Now to correct Holding's specific errors in his attempt to "quote" experts against me. Placing naïve trust in Edwin Yamauchi, he quotes Zoroastrianism expert Robert Zaehner out of context as if he denied anything I said. Yet had Holding actually done some genuine research, he would know that what Zaehner *actually* says (which Yamauchi downplays) is that "Israel found a kindred monotheistic creed in the religion of the prophet Zoroaster" and "from this religion too she learnt teachings concerning the afterlife altogether more congenial to her soul than had been the gloomy prospect offered her by her own tradition, teachings to which she had been a stranger before."[108] Thus, Zaehner supports *me*, not Holding. Indeed, on the Zoroastrian eschatological notion of a future eternal life, Zaehner says there was "surely" influence, for "the similarities are so great and the historical context so neatly apposite that it would be carrying scepticism altogether too far to refuse to draw the obvious conclusion" that the idea was derived from Zoroastrianism. Rightly so.

It is only *after that sentence* (on p. 57 of Zaehner's book) that what Holding quotes begins: "the case for a Judeo-Christian dependence on

Zoroastrianism *in its purely eschatological thinking* is quite different" (emphasis added). Yet Zaehner immediately says that "a deathless existence in body and soul at the end of time is affirmed" in early texts, hence only *apart from this one detail* does Zaehner call for doubt. In other words, Holding's quote from Zaehner refers to *other* elements of Zoroastrian eschatology (Zaehner mentions the peculiar details in Paul and the book of Revelation in particular). Otherwise, Zaehner does not doubt that the general idea of a resurrection into paradise or perdition was a product of influence. To the contrary, Zaehner holds resurrection as the exception that is "surely" an instance of influence, while it's only in regard to particular details (like uniting soul and body) where independent development is credible.

Then, *after* Holding's quote, Zaehner immediately says "the case of rewards and punishments, heaven and hell, however, is very different" for "the theory of a direct Zoroastrian influence on post-exilic Judaism does explain the sudden abandonment" of the old idea of *sheol* "and the sudden adoption, at precisely the time when the exiled Jews made contact with the Medes and Persians" of what was essentially a Zoroastrian "teaching concerning the afterlife." In fact, he says Daniel presents a clear case of Persian influence, and "thus from the moment that the Jews first made contact with the Iranians they took over the typical Zoroastrian doctrine of an individual afterlife in which rewards are to be enjoyed and punishments endured." And "so, too, the idea of a bodily resurrection at the end of time was probably original to Zoroastrianism, however it arose among the Jews."[109]

In other words, Zaehner is saying that the Zoroastrians came up with the idea of resurrection *first* and *on their own*, while the Jews did not develop any idea of resurrection until *after* their contact with the Persian religion. Hence when Zaehner expresses doubt whether the Jews borrowed their specific doctrines of resurrection, he does not mean what Holding claims (that the Zoroastrians got the idea from the Jews), but rather that the Jews got the idea *after* being influenced by the Zoroastrian doctrine of an afterlife, *but may have developed their own resurrection doctrine in response to this influence*, rather than simply adopting any particular Persian scheme. In other words, Zaehner is uncertain whether the Jewish resurrection doctrine *as a whole* was "borrowed" from Zoroastrianism, but he is otherwise clear that the *idea* of resurrection was certainly the product

of influence. And he's quite adamant when it comes to our subject: "the resurrection of the body," Zaehner says, "Christianity inherited from Zoroastrianism."[110]

It's no accident that the only contemporary scholars Holding can find arguing the contrary are Yamauchi and Bremmer.[111] They are pretty much the only ones left who maintain any skepticism. And yet Yamauchi does not argue *against* borrowing (nor for any reverse influence), but merely argues the evidence is not sufficient to convince him and therefore we should reserve judgment. But Yamauchi engages the dubious tactic of citing outdated and obsolete scholars against current, updated scholarship. He also uses selective quoting and special pleading—e.g. he simply dismisses late texts without considering any arguments for the antiquity of their contents (an approach that would destroy most of the Bible as well). Ultimately, Yamauchi concedes the very fact I stated in the first place: that the widest consensus of scholarship stands against his own skepticism.[112] Hence Holding tries to pretend a lone maverick represents the scholarly consensus, and yet even that maverick does not maintain the position Holding wants to maintain.

That leaves Bremmer. Right off the bat I was suspicious of this guy, since everything Holding quotes him saying is false. Does "the whole genre of Iranian apocalypticism ... postdat[e] Christian times"?[113] Theopompus proves the contrary. Is it at least the current consensus of scholars that the contents of *all* the relevant Zoroastrian texts are themselves post-Christian? No. The widest consensus of scholars has come to the opposite conclusion for the content of at least some Persian texts. Continuing this tendency to misrepresent the facts, Bremmer claims "Mary Boyce has consistently presented a static view— against all evidence and common sense,"[114] yet that's completely false: Mary Boyce (a renowned expert in Zoroastrian studies) presents a very nuanced and careful analysis of the historical development of Zoroastrian doctrine over time, taking into account numerous developments and changes. She does not regard all Zoroastrian texts and beliefs to pre-date later eras. Why would Bremmer say the opposite? Did he not really read her work? Or is he playing fast and loose with hyperbole and invective? Last but not least, Bremmer claims "Mary Boyce quotes only Aeneas, not Diogenes Laertius,"[115] which is again false: in her three volume history Boyce discusses both passages in detail.

With three irresponsible misstatements of fact to his credit already —one in almost every quote Holding chose to use—we can dismiss Bremmer as unreliable. He even appears to claim that Josephus never attributed "the idea of resurrection to the Pharisees" but "mentioned only their belief in the immortality of the soul,"[116] which of course is not true. Josephus wrote that "the Pharisees ... say that all souls are incorruptible, but the souls of good men only are transported into *other bodies* while the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment,"[117] and again that bad souls "are to be detained in an everlasting prison" while good souls "shall have power to revive and live again."[118] And Josephus was himself a Pharisee and says point blank that he believed in a resurrection of the body at the end of time.[119] It's possible Bremmer did not mean to deny exactly this. But either way, Bremmer still argues that the Jews did not develop any doctrine of resurrection until the 2nd century B.C., which, if true, would kill Holding's case for the contrary.[120] Thus, even if we trust Bremmer, his actual argument goes against Holding. So that makes *twice* that Holding tried to spin what fringe experts say into a support for his case, yet even *they* don't actually support him. I can only conclude that Holding must be counting on his readers not actually checking his references.

Finally, when Holding tries to play the expert himself, we get a fatal dose of fallacies and lazy research. For example, he argues that "Ezekiel speaks of the dead being raised from graves" and yet "the Persians exposed their dead" as if that mattered, but it doesn't. The fact is, the Persians collected the bones of those they exposed and interred them in ossuaries or shafts to await resurrection.[121] This is essentially what the Jews did, so there is no relevant difference here after all. In other words, of the differences that there were between Zoroastrian and Jewish burial practices (indeed, even of the differences that developed between Zoroastrian and Jewish resurrection beliefs), none matter for Holding's argument: for even the Zoroastrians had "places of burial" (Ezekiel's *qibrah*) to open for the dead to rise.

As another example of his specious tactics, Holding selectively quotes Plutarch, leaving out material that undermines his case, and then jumps to conclusions without actually researching them. Holding claims, for example, that Plutarch's quotation of Theopompus in *On Isis and Osiris* (47.370b-c) gives us "a seemingly contradictory description" and

“Plutarch makes no clear reference to resurrection of the body.” But had Holding actually looked at the passage in context, he would have seen that it began like this:

> A destined time shall come when it is decreed that [the Author of Evil] ... shall be utterly annihilated and shall disappear, and then the Earth shall become a level plain, and there shall be one manner of life and one form of government for a blessed people who shall all speak one tongue. But Theopompus says that, according to the magi, one god is to over-power the other each in turn for the space of three thousand years, [etc.] ... and finally Hades shall pass away, then shall the people be happy, and they shall neither need food nor cast a shadow.

In other words, Plutarch is not quoting everything Theopompus said, but only what he said that disagreed with what Plutarch had just described, and Plutarch is here only concerned with a disagreement over how the end would come about—whether all at once or after several ages of reversal. Otherwise, Plutarch’s description is clear: the future paradise he’s talking about will be a *life* on *Earth* (two details Holding left out), and it will involve the final elimination of *death* (Hades), and those who enjoy this ultimate paradise will not need to eat. This certainly sounds like a resurrection: an immortal return to earthly life. Even including the peculiar detail that in the future people will cast no shadow, there is nothing here that contradicts Diogenes Laertius, nor does Plutarch’s description allow Holding’s inference that only a disembodied afterlife was meant.

Nevertheless, to try and bolster his speculation that Theopompus originally described some sort of bodiless future, Holding ignores every detail except the last, claiming that “not casting a shadow would not fit with a physical, ‘resurrectional’ existence,” though he fails to explain why. Instead, he cites yet another passage that he obviously did not actually check himself, claiming that “Plutarch elsewhere says, those who ‘cast no shadows’ are those who have been liberated from the body,” as if this meant the only way to cast no shadow is to have no body (already a fallacious inference). But in actual fact, it’s not Plutarch who says this, but a Pythagorean ghost, in a story Plutarch relates from another source.[122]

Hence this reflects a particular sectarian doctrine and not Plutarch's own assumption (as he makes clear elsewhere—see below).

Moreover, the ghost in this story says "the souls of the dead neither cast a shadow nor blink their eyes," although they had form, color, facial features, and otherwise physically displaced the air ("as the souls of those who die came up from below they made a flame-like bubble as the air was displaced and then, as the bubble gently burst, came forth, human in form"), and they experienced physical torments and pleasures.[123] Hence these are not bodiless souls, but astral bodies, i.e. bodies made of elements superior to the body of flesh (just as Paul argues we will have when we are resurrected, in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5). More-over, all these souls are visible yet luminous—hence the reason they cast no shadow cannot be because they are bodiless (for they have form, color, and recognizable features, and are not fully transparent), but because they are radiant (for lights do not cast shadows). Elsewhere, in fact, Plutarch says stars and other lights cast no shadow, and that disembodied souls appear as rays of light, are transparent, and physically composed of ether.[124] In other words, since radiant bodies cast no shadow, we can't assume "casting no shadow" means a bodiless state, nor can we impose this Pythagorean doctrine of souls onto a description of Persian beliefs by Theopompus. If anything is shared in common between the two, it would sooner be luminosity than the absence of a body—in other words, transformation into a more glorious body, much like what Holding says the Jews believed.

And in fact, when we finally look at what Plutarch *himself* has to say about the idea of casting no shadow, being in a "bodiless state" is *not* what he assumes to be the cause. Instead, Plutarch is perplexed by the idea:

> The tale that no shadow is cast by a person who enters the Lycaeon [the holy inner sanctum in the temple of Arcadian Zeus] is not true, although it has acquired widespread credence. Is it because the air turns to clouds, and lowers darkly upon those who enter? Or is it because he that enters is condemned to death, and the followers of Pythagoras declare that the spirits of the dead cast no shadow, neither do they blink? Or is it because it is the sun which causes shadow, but the law dep-rives him that enters of the sunlight?[125]

From this we learn three things: (1) the idea that souls cast no shadows is uniquely Pythagorean and thus not Plutarch's view nor, as far as we know, the view of Theopompus or his Magi informants; (2) Plutarch didn't know why something would cast no shadow, and struggles with several hypotheses—so the phrase did not entail a bodiless state even to him; and (3) this is clearly not a case of being bodiless: for this "widely believed" claim was about flesh and blood people, and therefore it was "widely believed" that a body of flesh and blood could cast no shadow. In fact, it's suggestive that this new property is acquired only in the holy of holies, which the god was believed to inhabit—hence the Zoroastrians may have believed the whole Earth would become holy by God's eternal presence and thus all darkness would be abolished, shadows and all.

Whether that was the cause, or the idea that resurrected bodies would be luminous, we can't say, because Theopompus doesn't tell us. But we *can* infer one thing. For this tale about the Arcadian sanctum *also comes from Theopompus*. Polybius reports, "It is a sign of a blunted intelligence to say that some solid bodies when placed in the light cast no shadow, as Theopompus does when he tells us that those who enter the holy of holies of Zeus in Arcadia become shadowless."[126] Pausanias gives us more detail about this amazing chamber, this time from his own direct questioning of local Arcadians: there was a popular legend "that everything alike within the precinct, whether beast or man, casts no shadow" and "when a beast takes refuge" in it, a hunter "will not rush in after it, but remain outside, and though he sees the beast, he can see no shadow."[127] Here we have it: this story comes from Theopompus and independently from Pausanias, yet it clearly involved physical bodies of flesh and blood. Therefore, Theopompus *clearly did not think casting no shadow meant a bodiless state*. So Holding is quite wrong to claim he did.

Albert De Jong provides the most thorough discussion of this reference to casting no shadows in Plutarch (and in Greek and Iranian literature generally).[128] De Jong notes that most Zoroastrian scholars have rejected Holding's interpretation (that casting no shadow means a bodiless existence). Instead, some have offered the interpretation that all darkness will simply be abolished (as by God's eternal presence), while others have argued that since certain Zoroastrian texts have the sun "standing still in the middle of the sky" in the new world, "casting no shadow" could simply refer to the condition of things under a noonday sun.[129] De Jong himself

observes that in Zoroastrian texts the horses and chariots of Mithras are described as “casting no shadow,” while other texts say Zarathustra “did not see his own shadow on the earth” when he approached certain angelic beings because of their “great luminosity.”[130] From a survey of further evidence, De Jong ultimately concludes that early Zoroastrians believed they would receive “a spiritual body” at the resurrection and would thus become angelic beings like these—hence they would cast no shadow because their bodies would be radiant.[131] Thus confirming my point, and demonstrating how little Holding cares for doing any actual research.

Debating Zalmoxis

J.P. Holding isn't the only Christian apologist who acts like this. On the 27th of October in 2006, on the net radio show *The Infidel Guy* with Christian apologists Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, my claim that Zalmoxis was thought to be resurrected was also challenged. I was told that Zalmoxis taught his followers that he and they would *never* die, and therefore (it was argued) Zalmoxis never died and therefore (it was argued) he was never "resurrected." This is nonsense. Yet as is so often the case, once again we have to haul out the grass just to prove it's green. Here is what Herodotus says in the fourth book of his *Histories*, which I have translated directly from the Greek:

> **4.93:** Darius first conquered the Getae who consider themselves immortal...
>
> **4.94:** This is the way they consider them-selves immortal: **when they are killed** they do not think they die but that they go to the divine being Zalmoxis (though some of them call this being Gebeleïzis). Every five years they send off one of their group chosen by lot as a messenger to Zalmoxis, giving him orders on each occasion regarding what he must do. And this is how they send him: some of them appointed to the task hold short spears, while others grab the hands and feet of the one who is to be sent off to Zalmoxis, swing him back and forth, and toss him up in the air, right onto the spearheads. If he is impaled **and dies**, they think the god favors them. If he **does not die**, they blame the very messenger, saying he is a bad man, and once they have laid the blame on him they send off another. Of course, they give a messenger his orders **while he is still alive**. These are the same Thracians who also threaten their god by shooting arrows up into the sky at thunder and lightning. And they do not think there is any other god except their own.

4.95: What I hear from the Greeks who live on the Hellespont and the Pontus is that this Zalmoxis was a man enslaved in Samos—enslaved, in fact, to Pythagoras, son of Mnes-archus. Later he was freed and made a great deal of money, and once he had made his money he went back home. Since the Thrac-ians lead miserable lives and are rather stupid, this Zalmoxis, who had learned that the Ion-ian culture and lifestyle is deeper than the Thracian (inasmuch as he had lived with Greeks—and not the feeblest of Greeks, either, but the philosopher Pythagoras), got himself a banquet hall and there would invite the most prominent people and entertain them sumptuously, all the while teaching them that **neither he nor those who drank with him nor any of their descendants would die**, but they would come to that place where they would have eternal life and all good things would come to them. While he was doing what I said and teaching these things, he was building an underground dwelling in there. As soon as he finished this, he vanished from the Thracians, having gone down into his underground dwelling, and he lived there for three years. They missed him and **mour-ned him as dead**. Then in the fourth year he appeared to the Thracians, and because of that the things Zalmoxis told them became credible.

4.96: This is what **they** say he did. But regar-ding that underground dwelling I myself neither disbelieve nor believe much at all. In fact, I think this Zalmoxis lived many years before Pythagoras. And whether there was any man called Zalmoxis, or whether this is just some divine being among the Getae, let's put that aside.

There are several points to make here. First, it's clear the argument made on that radio show takes its information on 'what Zalmoxis taught' from hostile Greeks, not the believing Getae, and from a story intended to discredit and ridicule the Getic faith, which Herodotus does not believe and all but refutes. His first paragraph relates what Herodotus knew from the Getae, then his second paragraph, as Herodotus himself says, does not come from the believers, but from their unbelieving Greek neighbors. Yet according to his own information, Zalmoxis predates Pythagoras, and therefore the entire story he heard from the Greeks is apparently bogus, and therefore cannot reflect what the Getae actually believed or taught.

This Greek version of events is exactly comparable to anti-Christian accounts of Jesus, such as making up stories about Mary being impregnated by a Roman soldier or Christ's body being stolen, all to "explain away" the actual faith-claims of the believers. Here, a story is being made up about a trick pulled on those "stupid" Thracians by an unscrupulous ex-slave, in order to "explain away" the actual resurrection claims of the Getic religion. When it comes to interpreting early Christian beliefs, a Christian would not tolerate any argument that assumed such a slander was true, so he cannot assume it in this case, either, without being a hypocrite. The bottom line is that what Herodotus heard from the Greeks is clearly not true, nor is it an accurate description of what the Getae believed. Therefore, right from the get-go, the argument made on the radio is based on false and inaccurate information.

Second, when Herodotus says the Getae believe they are "immortal" he carefully goes on to explain what he means by that, and from his description it should be *obvious* that he does not mean they thought they can't be killed or would never die in any sense at all. They clearly believe they die. As Herodotus says: "when they are killed," then they go to eternal life. They even kill each other to prove it! Their whole religion involves killing a messenger just to go and talk to their god. And clearly they'd all know that their neighbors and kin can and do die in battle, or of disease, old age, and so on. So the claim that these people actually thought no one of them ever dies is plainly false, as is clear not only from common sense, but from the very description provided by Herodotus. This is further supported even by the slanderous account from the Greeks, who admit the Getae thought Zalmoxis *was dead*.

Third, this argument requires an interpretation that makes no actual sense anyway. If the return of Zalmoxis was thought by the Getae to mean he never died but only hid away somewhere for three years, that would do nothing whatever to persuade them that they or Zalmoxis would never die. Such an event would prove nothing of the sort, and could not have convinced anyone of the plausibility of his promise of immortality. Yet his return (so the hostile account claims) persuaded them that he and they were immortal—immortal in the specific sense Herodotus describes, which is exactly the same sense in which Christians believe themselves to be immortal, since when they die their souls go to live with Jesus, just as the Getae's souls go to live with Zalmoxis. Although the Getae might not

have believed they would get yet another body later on (unless this Zalmoxis cult was an offshoot of Persian Zoroastrian cult, which *did* at the time teach such a general resurrection, and the Getae's peculiar monotheism might indicate just such a connection), they certainly did believe they would live forever in a real paradise of some kind *after* the death of their mortal bodies, just as Christians believed would happen to them.

Fourth, the slanderous Greek story must have been an attempt to rationalize and explain away something the Getae really believed, which means it must indicate something genuine about their religion. For example, the claim that a Roman soldier impregnated Mary proves the Christians believed something special about the birth of Jesus, just as the claim that the body was stolen proves there was a belief among some Christians (at the time of the slander) that there was a missing body. So, too, for the Zalmoxis cult. And here it's not hard to figure out what's the slander and what's the underlying belief targeted by that slander. The idea that Zalmoxis was a common slave, and the whole story about his service to Pythagoras and his subsequent avarice and deception, is obviously a slander, as is the story about hiding in a cave. Herodotus himself gives reasons to doubt all of this.

Though Herodotus also can't decide if Zalmoxis was ever a real person, this is the natural doubt of a rational Greek historian, who might suspect even the Getic account to be a mere myth that they nevertheless believe to be true. And what that was is fairly obvious: they believed their one and only god Zalmoxis had visited a group of their ancestors, then died, and then appeared risen from the dead as a proof of his teaching that believers would live eternally with him in paradise. They must also have believed there was a sacred meal attended by the founders of the cult in which drink was shared with their god, sealing a promise that all who drank would receive eternal life. We can be fairly certain of all this because the slanderous account can only be aimed at *explaining away* these very beliefs—hence the conspicuous role of drink, on a past occasion of importance, with the god actually being present and teaching his disciples, then disappearing and being mourned as dead, and then appearing and proving his defeat of death. Otherwise, if the Getae didn't believe these things, the Greek story would make no sense, even to Herodotus, since it would not correspond to anything the Getae actually

claimed, and thus would not explain away anything. For example, the Greek story specifically depicts the Getae believing Zalmoxis died, and then being convinced he was immortal by his subsequent appearance—if the Getae didn't believe that, then a Greek attempt to explain it with an elaborate story about trickery would be pointless and inexplicable. We must be consistent: claiming the disciples stole the body is as much a proof of a resurrection-belief as claiming Zalmoxis pretended to be dead.

Again, none of this entails or implies that Christians "borrowed" from Zalmoxis cult the idea of an incarnated, dying, and rising god promising eternal life through a sacred act of drinking at a meal. But it does entail that those elements of Christianity were not new, but had been elements of other cults long before (and possibly still in their day). In other words, there were already pagans who saw nothing wrong with believing their one and only God had come to earth and visited them, died, and appeared risen from the dead. These same pagans also had no trouble believing that sharing in a sacred meal could secure for them (and their descendants) an eternal life promised by their god. Thus, at least in this respect, Christians were not working against the grain of plausible religious concepts of the time, which is exactly my point.

How the Pagan Mission Changed Christianity

It's sometimes claimed that the Jews made a distinction between "resurrection" and mere "resuscitation" (even though there is no evidence such a distinction was at all widespread among the Jews), but that makes no difference here: anyone who would readily believe in the resuscitation of a corpse (and we see many pagans did) could easily believe (for example) in the subsequent improvement of that body rendering it immortal. The Zoroastrians believed this explicitly, and many of the Greeks and Romans did, too, in their conception of the divine body of gods and immortal heroes— and what the Christians were selling was essentially the very same thing.

Otherwise, there was certainly no major distinction between "resurrection" and "resuscitation" in the Greek or Hebrew languages: the same words meant both. For instance, the most distinctive Christian word for "resurrection" (*anistêmi* and cognates) was used just as often to refer to ordinary occasions of "getting up" from sleep or rest, waking up from an apparent death, or the pagan idea of revival of a corpse.[132] Even the Christians themselves used the same word for mere revivification.[133] So there was no distinction in the vocabulary. And the *conceptual* distinction was hardly commonplace or well-defined even within Judaism.[134] In fact, the general resurrection for some Jews was identical to resuscitation, the only difference being that God would change the laws of the universe so bodies would not die or decay (much as the Zoroastrians believed), whereas other Jews (like Paul) imagined instead that God would change our bodies to produce the same effect—which was no different from what pagans imagined happening to deified heroes.[135] In fact, that the Christian conception of resurrection was essentially the same as the pagan idea of apotheosis in a new divine body is quite clear in Paul, who describes resurrection as rising in a superior, glorious body akin to the bodies of heavenly beings (1 Corinthians 15:35-54), and then ascending into the sky (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) to rule over angels (1 Corinthians 6:3), which is essentially how the pagans imagined their demigods.

I've mentioned before how Holding likes to pretend he knows what he's talking about. A good example right here is his remark that:

> While we are aware ... that the word *anistemi* was used of resurrection, resuscitation, or ev-en such mundane things as getting up from a seat, the word-form *anastasis* I have yet to see any evidence of being used of anything but what is conceptually Jewish resurrection.

He has not seen any evidence of this, because he never bothered to look. Just take a gander at the definition of *anastasis* in the *Liddell & Scott Greek-English Lexicon*. There you can see how wrong Holding is, for you will find listed every mundane meaning with cited examples: it could mean any ordinary getting up or rising up (even in the Septuagint: Lamentations 3:63), or it could mean any kind of rising from the dead. Not only does Hebrews 11:35 use it to refer to what Holding would tell you were mere "resuscitations" in the Old Testament, but we have it this way in pagan texts as well. Aeschylus uses it to refer to the mere revival of a corpse.[136] Lucian uses it to refer to the resurrection of Tyndareus by Asclepius.[137] Plotinus uses it to refer to the soul's "resurrection" from the body.[138] According to the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, the word *anastasis* is used over thirty times in extant pagan literature before the time of Christ. Are we to believe these are *all* in reference to "what is conceptually Jewish resurrection"? Holding's bluff has been called. There simply was no terminological distinction between "kinds" of resurrection in antiquity.

Once I exposed him on this, Holding desperately rewrote his response. In his new version he mostly waxed on about irrelevant points—another of his common tactics: to pretend he's arguing for or against something when in fact he's doing neither because he can't, since all the facts and arguments are so plainly against him. But then he also falsely claimed I denied there was any *conceptual* distinction between kinds of revival. But that must betray his poor memory (or open dishonesty), since I had repeatedly said there was such a distinction *in concept*, just not in the vocabulary—another example of Holding's inability (or refusal) to get straight what I say. But even this distinction 'in concept' is irrelevant,

since there were pagans aplenty who were ready to believe in either kind of revival.

So, contrary to Holding, there was no apparent barrier to conversion here. Indeed, even the New Testament proves this: when Paul preached at Athens, then one of the greatest centers of intellectual life and critical thought in the whole world, his audience reacted in *several* different ways—they didn't all think what he said was ridiculous. Though "some" of the Greeks "sneered," others said "we want to hear you again on this subject" and "a few" even "became followers of Paul and believed" (Acts 17:30-32). That probably represents the true proportion of pagan responses to the entire Christian message: some sneered, exactly as Holding observes; but some remained curious and considered it; and a few even bought it and believed.

Holding then says "we can see well enough that Paul had to fight the Gnostics, the Platonists, and the ascetics on these counts," though it's unclear to me what he means. There is no case anywhere in the Epistles, or even in Acts, where Paul debates with any of these groups by name, nor any example of any of these groups disputing the resurrection of Jesus. Even Paul's opponents at Corinth only denied the resurrection of the converted, not that of Jesus—Paul thus rebuts them by explaining how denying the latter was an unforeseen consequence of denying the former, which means he assumed they all agree Christ was raised.[139] I can only suppose Holding means that Paul 'must' have engaged such debates, even though we have none on record (except general allusions to them, as in Acts 17). That's probably true—at least, Paul must have debated the concept of resurrection with, for example, Platonists in Athens (as well as philosophers of every other stripe). It's less certain if he debated whether Jesus was raised with Christian Gnostics, since most such sects already agreed Jesus had risen. Paul might have debated the *details* with them, but there's no specific evidence of that. In fact there's no evidence he wrestled with *any* Christian groups who actually denied the resurrection of Christ. I suppose that's possible, though explaining how there could be such groups so close to the evidence would raise an interesting conundrum for Holding. But in any event, Holding wrongly assumes that all of Paul's enemies were Gnostics or all ancient philosophers were Platonists.

Hence against the obvious conclusion that many pagans had nothing against the Christian notion of resurrection, Holding declares "the pagan

world was awash with points of view associated with those who thought matter was evil and at the root of all of man's problems." Such a point of view did exist among a segment of the population, yes, especially among the more snobbish elite. It was indeed the dominant paradigm among Orphic mystics and Platonist philosophers, and a feature of the more popular mystery religions. But we have no evidence of many die-hard advocates of those movements flocking to early Christianity. Hence it appears those were the very people the Christians largely failed to evangelize in their first hundred years. Rather, their success was greatest among the middle and lower classes, among whom this Platonic and Orphic disdain for the flesh is less in evidence. And yet even so, the earliest Christians sought to accommodate even these sensibilities, as we see in Paul's effort to articulate a view of the resurrection that appealed to the Orphic mindset: we will leave the dirty material behind and get bodies made of superior, heavenly material instead.[140] However you interpret what Paul was trying to say in these passages, it cannot be denied that what he says would have appealed to the very people Holding has in mind here, because it satisfied their desire to live forever without the stains and burdens of our present bodies. Thus, Christianity could be sold to everyone.

As Christianity evolved into numerous competing sects over the later first century, some went even further toward this Orphic disdain for the flesh accommodated by Paul (and we generally call these groups Gnostic, though not always correctly), while others went in the other direction, toward a restoration of the flesh that died (whom I call Sarcicists, after *sarx* / *sarcis*, "flesh"). Concerning this split, Dale Martin demonstrates that "early Christian preaching about the resurrection of the dead" actually "divided the Corinthian church along social status lines." He shows how the elite members "influenced by popular philosophy to deprecate the body, opposed the idea of a resurrected body," while the lower classes more "readily accepted early Christian preaching about resurrected bodies." The division arose because Jew and Gentile alike "could find analogies" to Christian resurrection within "their own culture, especially in views apparently held by the masses." But these views were "generally ridiculed by the philosophically educated," whereas to the lower classes such a view was "perfectly acceptable." In fact, popular concern to save the flesh is reflected in the popularity of personal and

funerary beliefs that obsessed over the relative integrity of the corpse and body.[141] Not everyone regarded corpses as mere offal. Most held the welfare of the corpse to be important to the well-being of the dead, to the point that discarding or mutilating corpses often disturbed people—and that's not the attitude of a Platonist. This didn't mean such people expected to get their bodies back—but it does mean they would not have *abhorred* the idea of getting their bodies back, especially improved bodies, free of all that was bad about the old ones, *which is exactly what the Christians were offering.*

Caroline Bynum, a leading expert on Western resurrection ideology, argues that "one cannot say that Christians taught literal, material, fleshly resurrection because Christ rose thus" as "there is a full range of interpretation of Jesus's resurrection in the Gospels and Paul," so the choice made by any particular group still "requires explanation." And it appears that one leading motive of the Sarcicists was to maintain social hierarchy and control. Bynum demonstrates that Christians who explicitly defended a resurrection of the flesh after the 2nd century argued it was necessary to make sure, for example, that women remained subjugated to men. Jerome, for instance, disgusted by women using a Pauline doctrine to justify haughty declarations of sexual equality, implied that resurrection of the flesh was needed to oppose this, apparently to ensure women remained subjugated to men in the future world. In contrast, Paul envisioned the *elimination* of all distinctions of class, race, and gender in the end.[142] Even Paul's infamous (though apocryphal) misogyny was based on the inheritance of sin through Adam and Eve, which of course would all be done away with in the new creation—for once their "body of Adam" died, women would no longer inherit the sin of Eve.[143] This was the original vision of the Christian movement: equality for everyone in a utopian future, against the elite use of class, race, and gender distinctions to oppress the people under the heel of injustice. But after its first hundred years this vision was hijacked by a sect obsessed with *maintaining* those very inequalities, even in heaven. Since this development came many generations later, the story of why and how it took place can have nothing to do with what really happened to Jesus on that first Easter Day.

We cannot be certain whether that was the original motive for a shift away from Paul and toward a more radical Sarcicism in the first hundred years of the Church. It appears to have been a factor in its success later on

(especially after the 3rd century, when Christianity became a religion of the government), but those first hundred years are inadequately documented to find out what happened or why (which is also a problem for anyone who wants to insist, contrary to the evidence of Paul, that the original church was thoroughly Sarcicist). But from the analysis of Dale Martin and others, and *given the evidence of popular beliefs I surveyed above*, it seems likely that many among the uneducated masses, and even some among the educated class, were disturbed by the idea of losing their body. These groups were apparently not impressed by highbrow attempts to argue for a disembodied immortality. To the contrary, regardless of what they believed, getting their bodies *back* was more what they wanted, and was easier to understand, defend, and explain, and that made them highly receptive to the idea. Judaism clearly offered it, and early Christianity was unmistakably a Jewish movement.

Then an influx of various Jews and pagans who were more attracted to the idea of a resurrection of the flesh (suitably improved and glorified) would have inevitably influenced how some churches came to interpret the resurrection—and once persecution became more widespread (in the 2nd and 3rd century), many actual and potential converts who were happier with other modes of salvation might have found easier paths in accepted pagan cults and Jewish sects. This meant persecution may have caused Christianity to swell with those very people who wanted to get their flesh back—since Christianity was the only cult offering that on easy terms (Judaism offered it only on very hard terms, as explained in Chapter 2). And these people would primarily have come from the most anti-elitist segments of the population—for it was precisely their disdain for the ivory castle argumentation of philosophers that led them to sneer at highbrow concepts of immortality and favor instead the more popular ideas, elevating the dreams and longings of the common man above the fancy rhetoric of the stuffy academics. The effect this had on the development of Christian dogma was probably significant (I discuss this further in Chapter 8).

In the final analysis, when Holding quotes the remark of Pheme Perkins that “Christianity’s pagan critics generally viewed resurrection as misunderstood metempsychosis at best” and “at worst, it seemed ridiculous,” we can agree: that does capture the range of attitudes among its *critics*. But those critics did not represent every view held in antiquity,

and by definition they did not represent Christianity's supporters or converts. It's a simple matter of logic: those who sympathize will join or tolerate a creed, while those who have opposing ideas will use them to attack that creed. So we cannot claim what those critics say is what the *converts* believed. To the contrary, it almost certainly is not—that's why they converted. Thus, Holding's arguments do well to explain why some of those who refused to join the movement did not convert. But his arguments tell us nothing about why those who converted actually did so. He can't present a single example of anyone saying "I used to think resurrection was so impossible as to be ridiculous, but the Christians convinced me otherwise!" So Holding's original premise must be restated: "among *some* pagans, resurrection was deemed impossible." Can we generalize from that to say that all pagans would have resisted the idea? No.

Obviously, Epicureans like Celsus had strong dogmatic reasons to hold resurrection in contempt. That's why we have no record of any Epicurean being convinced within the first hundred years, and why Celsus tries so hard to argue that resurrection was ridiculous. But Epicureanism was always a minority sect in antiquity. So Holding cannot use the arguments of an Epicurean to represent the entirety of the ancient world. Yes, for Celsus, as he himself said (from the fictional perspective of a skeptical Jew), "the question is whether any one who was really dead ever rose with a veritable body." But neither his Epicurean, nor a Sadducean, nor a Platonic attitude were commonplace among the masses, nor were they universal even among the elite. His own argument attests to this, for Celsus is criticizing Christians for making the *same* claim of resurrection as many pagans, not a different one. Again, differences in metaphysical detail are irrelevant here, since no matter the details, it's still the same thing: getting to rise from the dead to live forever in a better body. That's what the Christians *as well as a great many pagans* believed was possible.

The bottom line is, as even Origen points out, "being an Epicurean, Celsus does not hold the same views with the Greeks, and neither recognizes demons nor worships gods as do the Greeks" and therefore his critique of Christianity does not represent the general attitudes of the Greeks (or Romans or Syrians or anyone else).[144] It represents certain segments of opinion, but a minority only. Similarly, all of N.T. Wright's evidence (to which Holding refers) comes only from a few literary elites,

who were not representative of the ancient pagan world. Indeed, much of Wright's evidence comes from the wrong period (four centuries before the Roman era!) and the wrong place (the highly unique culture of Classical Athens). In the early Roman Empire, Epicureanism was among the rarest dogmas going. Platonism was more popular, but far more popular still were eclectic varieties of Stoicism and Aristotelianism, and the beliefs among the masses could be described as vulgarized amalgams of all these, with a rich variety of differing opinions. Christians simply won the hearts of those who had sympathetic opinions, hence those who believed it was at least *possible* to come back to life in a superior body. And the evidence is abundantly clear that there were many who thought so.

Jewish Background

So much for the mission to the pagans. What about the Jews? Holding claims that among the Jews "there was no perception of the resurrection of an individual before the general resurrection at judgment." But that's not true. Individual Hebrew and Christian resurrections abound in scripture,[145] and many Jews had no trouble believing that Jesus might be the resurrected Elijah or John the Baptist—in fact, they *expected* the resurrection (or at least "return") of Elijah to presage the general resurrection of Israel. This is clear from the following conversation recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

> Jesus commanded them, saying, "Report this vision to no one, until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." And his disciples asked him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that *Elijah* must come first?" And he answered and said, "Elijah did come, and shall restore all things. Indeed I say to you, that Elijah has already arrived, and they knew him not, but did to him whatever they wanted. In such a way shall the Son of man also suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood he was talking about John the Baptist.[146]

In other words, Jesus says he will rise from the dead, prompting his disciples to ask him, if that's the case, why Elijah hasn't returned from the dead (or from heaven, where the dead go),[147] since he is supposed to come *first*. Jesus responds by saying Elijah already did come. And that meant John the Baptist was the risen Elijah, and so the disciples infer.

Thus, it must have been a common belief that there would be an individual return to the land of the living, before the end, similar to Christ's (in whom resided the spirit of God rather than, in the case of John, the spirit of Elijah). We see this also when King Herod heard of the miracles performed by Jesus and his disciples, at which "he said, 'John the Baptizer is risen from the dead, and that's why these powers work in him!'" While "others said it is Elijah" or "one of the prophets" of old (who certainly died and were buried, even if Elijah wasn't), "Herod, when

he heard these things, said, 'John, whom I beheaded, *he* is risen'." We even hear that "others" besides Herod also believed Jesus was the resurrected John.[148] Does that sound like "there was no perception of the resurrection of an individual before the general resurrection"? To the contrary, it sounds like Jews were ready to believe in just such a thing.

Other sources confirm there were many Jews, even within the Rabbinic tradition, who expected the resurrection to take place in stages, not all at once. There were many different opinions as to how many stages and in what order they would rise. But in one scheme there would be four stages: first Adam, *then* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, *then* those buried in Palestine, *then* everyone else. Some Jews also thought their martyrs would rise before everyone else, too.[149] Matthew even says "many saints" rose on the day Jesus died, obviously before the resurrection of everyone else, another example of the Jewish idea of a staged resurrection.[150] And, of course, as we already saw, the Gospels attest to the belief that John might rise from the dead before the general resurrection, as well as the belief that Elijah or even some *other* prophet would rise early, heralding the approach of the end. But it's notable that the first expected to rise in one scheme was Adam—which might explain why Christ was regarded as the 'final' Adam.[151]

Either way, the idea of a multi-staged resurrection formed the basis of Paul's apologetic for why Jesus rose before everyone else: "in Christ all will be made alive, *but each in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits, *then* those who belong to Christ, at his coming, and *then* the end comes."[152] That Paul regarded Christ as the "firstfruits" entails he believed the resurrection of Jesus was the first stage of the general resurrection, for the firstfruits were always the first sheaf of grain in *one general harvest*, and in like fashion Paul emphasizes that the resurrection must take place in the *proper order*. Thus Paul, like many other Jews, believed the general resurrection would come in stages, so the resurrection of Jesus would (and did) indicate the general resurrection had begun—which is why Paul appears to have expected the end to come in his own lifetime.[153]

Was There a Better Idea?

So there was no barrier here, either—many Jews were prepared to accept that a Christ might rise from the dead before the rest of Israel. However, Holding does raise a more nuanced argument: "A physical resurrection was completely unnecessary for merely starting a religion," he says, since "it would have been enough to say that Jesus' body had been taken up to heaven, like Moses' or like Elijah's." Of course, this argument requires supposing Jesus was fictional. If it is the case that Jesus was executed and buried as the Gospels say, then resurrection was the *only* claim available, since an actual public death and burial would prevent any other claim being made. In other words, if everyone knew Jesus was dead, then Christians could only claim he ascended to heaven by *also* claiming he rose (in some sense) from the dead. But even if Holding can wriggle out of that conundrum, there are three other important problems with his last argument.

The first problem with this argument is that it suffers from a common flaw in counterfactual history: it assumes only the easiest and most persuasive ideas win out. History decisively refutes such a notion: a great many zany ideas have gained widespread purchase and endured for centuries. For example, requiring castration to enter the priesthood was "completely unnecessary" for the success of the Attis cult, since it "would have been enough" to have, say, some sort of symbolic castration instead (exactly like Paul's device of replacing the true circumcision with a "spiritual" one, even calling that the *better* one).[154] But they didn't. And yet the cult flourished, *at least* as well as Christianity did in its first hundred years. In like fashion, in later Christian history Unitarianism was easier to sell than Nicean Trinitarianism, since Unitarianism (as championed, for example, within Arianism) was less convoluted and left fewer opportunities for attack and criticism, yet the Church sided with the latter despite having to expend vast resources and foster tremendous strife and violence to win the argument. So religions often succeed by starting out or sticking with the position harder to defend.

The second problem with this argument is that it assumes there was no other reason for choosing the more difficult sell. As we've already seen, there were reasons why many people, among both Jews and Gentiles, *wanted* to believe in a resurrection, either by raising the flesh or gaining a superior body like heroes and demigods. Those were the people who joined up, and many eventually formed the Sarcicist sects of the Christian church. Their reasons for believing something regarded as so odd by various others had more to do with their particular desires and expectations, and disdain for lofty philosophical systems, than with their being convinced by a decisive presentation of empirical evidence (a point we shall address in later chapters).

Both the first and this second problem negate Holding's argument because Christianity's success was not at all remarkable until the late 3rd century. Before then it was a struggling minority cult. Indeed, it barely even blipped on the radar of Roman society before the age of Trajan. I'll demonstrate this in Chapter 18. Here it's enough to note that, when the evidence was still theoretically checkable and therefore relevant to Holding's case, Christianity only won a tiny fraction of the hearts and minds of the Greek, Roman, and Jewish world. That kind of humble success does not require Christianity to have been the most sellable product since the invention of beer. As long as it would sell at all, as long as a tiny fraction of the evangelized groups would find it attractive—and we've shown they would—then Christianity would succeed on the scale we actually observe for that first century, just as the cult of Attis did. And we can certainly say that requiring men to hack off their testicles is a far stronger deterrent than preaching a Christ risen in the flesh, an idea a great many people already accepted as plausible.

Besides all the evidence already given, consider the 2nd-century remark of Justin Martyr (emphasis added):

> When we say that the Word, who is our teach-er, Jesus Christ the firstborn of God, was pro-duced without sexual union, and that he was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascen-ded to heaven, *we propound nothing new or differ-ent from what you believe* regarding those whom you consider Sons of God.[155]

Justin could not make this argument it if wasn't true—which means even his own strictly Sarcicist notion of resurrection was neither new nor different for pagans, refuting Holding's claim that it was. Holding might claim Justin is lying, but why should we believe that? Justin would not shoot himself in the foot by using an argument his pagan audience knew was baloney. For if Justin knew pagans would know this statement is false, why would he say it? Clearly, he believed it would appeal to pagans and win his argument. Therefore, it must have been true—true enough not to make him look like a liar.

But the third and most important problem with Holding's last argument is that it places the Gospels before Paul—when we know the order is the other way around. Holding says "it would have been enough to say that Jesus' body had been taken up to heaven" in order to get the religion started, yet as it turns out, that appears to be exactly how it *did* start: Paul never makes any distinction between Christ's resurrection and ascension—and he also equates our resurrection with Christ's, and describes our resurrection as an ascension.[156] Holding asks "why bother making the road harder?" But clearly that's a question to ask for later Christians, not the Christians of Paul's generation—for maybe they *didn't* make it harder.

And as we've already seen, those who later deviated from Paul by re-conceiving Christ's resurrection as a revival of his (divinely improved) corpse, and then distinguished that event from his ascension, were not making the road harder—rather, they were making it *easier*—for their chosen target audience: the disgruntled, anti-elitist masses, who were awash with stories of revived corpses and resurrected god-men appearing on earth. Though this did make it a harder sell to many educated elites and their allies and sympathizers, we see that Christianity already had a very hard time winning such people over, exactly as Holding's argument predicts. In contrast, those few elite intellectuals who eventually did convert *and told us why* do not give the account of their reasons that Holding wants: rather than being overwhelmed by what we would call empirical evidence, they were *dissatisfied with all the alternatives* (I'll present this case in Chapter 17).

Conclusion

It’s clear that, contrary to Holding’s claims, a bodily resurrection, even of an individual, was not regarded as impossible by all pagans and Jews, but only by some of them. Indeed, for many, especially among those groups the Christians most successfully evangelized, such a resurrection was eminently credible and sometimes desired. Thus, Holding’s argument fails even if we suppose the Gospels represent the original Christian belief, and we’ve seen reasons to suspect they do not.

4. Was the New Always Bad?

James Holding argues next that for the Romans, “Old was good. Innovation was bad,” and “this was a big sticking point for Christianity, because it could only trace its roots back to a recent founder.” But that isn’t really true. From the very beginning in the letters of Paul, every Christian text aimed at persuasion connects Christianity intimately and profoundly with the Jewish scriptures, regarded even by pagans as among the most ancient oracles of man. Christianity *never* claimed to have been “founded” by Jesus—it *always* claimed that Jesus was merely the culmination of a divine plan that had been written down for millennia (e.g. Romans 16:25-26), by an ancient God whose worship many Romans respected precisely because the Jewish religion could claim such great antiquity.

Even Tacitus, notable for his loathing of the Jews, admits their religion is ultimately “sanctioned by its antiquity.”[157] And the Roman state actually passed laws respecting the “ancestral traditions” of the Jews, which included protecting their scriptures from sacrilegious theft or vandalism.[158] As Robin Lane Fox observes:

> Of the world’s major religions, only Budd-hism made a complete break with tradition at its birth: Christianity made no such claim. It could meet the traditionalist culture of pagan contemporaries on equal terms.[159]

Hence Christianity was potentially respectable—so long as the Christian was given enough time to explain himself, and his audience was open to such supernatural wonders as the Christian story contained, and was sympathetic to its anti-elitist ideals.

Holding is right, however, that as long as Christianity *appeared* to be a complete innovation, too few would have accepted it, and as a result it was often derided as “novel” by those who knew little about it. But as soon as anyone gave a Christian missionary the time of day, the appearance of novelty evaporated, and the cult then, and quite plausibly, claimed one of

the most ancient and venerable origins of any known religion. As a result, Christianity was no more "new" to the Greeks and Romans than other novel foreign cults. These included Mithraism from Phrygia and Manichaeism from Parthia, and the worship of Isis the Egyptian, Attis the Syrian, Antinoös the Deified Lover of Hadrian, and Glaucon of Abonuteichos, as well as any of the many Emperor Cults, particularly the most prevalent of them, the worship of the Divine Augustus, which had priests and temples throughout the Empire.[160] And all the Greek schools of philosophy (Platonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, etc.) were not only novel when they were contrived, and yet phenomenally successful in the East, but both novel *and* foreign when introduced to Rome, and yet won her over as well.

Even Acts reports that under Rome "all the Athenians and the foreigners living [in Athens] would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new."[161] And just like Seneca, whose own remarks I quoted in Chapter 1, Tacitus only reveals the impotence of his disdain when he says essentially the same of Rome as Acts says of Imperial Athens: that Christianity gained purchase in Rome, "where *all* things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular."[162] For all his protestation, Tacitus reveals the hard truth: that the "hideous and shameful" was nevertheless popular—even in the very capital of the Roman Empire.

And thus the Romans so frequently found ways to paint the new as old that an endless stream of novel cults and philosophies came to permeate every inch of the Empire, even despite resistance from some among the elite—from Cato to Seneca to Juvenal—who found the unstoppable popularity of these novelties appalling. But unstoppable they were. So no appeal to a Roman resistance to the "new" can argue against the natural success of Christianity. If dozens of other new cults and philosophies could succeed in spite of this resistance, then so could Christianity. In fact, the most conspicuous elements of innovation in Christianity were its most popular features: it took the religion of Judaism, which was already winning converts from among the pagans, and made it *even more attractive*, by making it far less onerous (as explained in Chapter 2); and it promised to subvert the most despised of elite values and produce an egalitarian utopia of justice for the common man (though for now only within the Church). Of course, this would make it a

loathsome superstition to most among the elite, and to many Jews. But among the disgruntled masses, Jew and Gentile alike, it could be exciting and attractive. The Christians even eliminated some of the worst complaints against Judaism that opponents like Tacitus leveled at it. For example, they abandoned the very laws Tacitus regarded as "sinister and abominable," especially circumcision, and they abandoned the racism and insular "group loyalty" that Tacitus also singled out for derision.[163] So Christianity could only have been an improvement in his view.

In contrast, Holding is quite wrong to claim that Christian *eschatology* was new. Of course, it was entirely in accord with what most Jews had believed and taught for centuries, so Holding can only mean it appeared novel to pagans inexperienced with Jewish teachings. But this Jewish eschatology was clearly no barrier to winning over pagan sympathizers and even converts to Judaism, so it could not have been a problem for the Christian mission, either. Moreover, the whole "idea of sanctification, of an ultimate cleansing and perfecting of the world and each person," derives entirely from pagan Zoroastrianism: it had been a staple of Persian religious life and society for centuries, and had infiltrated Greco-Roman thought well before Christianity came along (as discussed in Chapter 3). For instance, the doctrine of a cleansing cataclysm of fire that would renew the entire universe and purify human souls was a common belief among Stoics (and Romans were more attracted to Stoic philosophy than any other), and some Middle Platonists advocated the idea as well, and there is no evidence the masses rejected these ideas.[164] So there was nothing *new* about this.

Likewise, anyone acquainted with Christian literature (especially on the Garden of Eden) knows even the *Christians* believed "the past was the best of times, and things have gotten worse since then." They merely expected a cataclysmic improvement—but so did the Zoroastrians, many Stoics, and some Middle Platonists. The popular Greco-Roman concept was that everything would start over again perfect, and play out again the same way (though perhaps with small variations). The Jews, following the original Persian scheme, merely tweaked this idea into a vision of a final material or heavenly paradise ruled by God, and the Christians simply borrowed that idea. Considering their target audience, this helped Christianity more than hurt it: the common man would have preferred this hopeful vision of the future to the obscure and depressing metaphysics of

the despised elite (whose views could not claim anywhere near the same antiquity as those of the Jews and Magi). And Holding presents no evidence of hostility to Christian eschatology anyway, not even from the elite.

In the end, Holding's argument that the Christian claim to antiquity still faced "a hurdle that Christianity could never overcome outside a limited circle ... without some substantial offering of proof" is far too strong. Christianity's difficulty here was no greater than that faced by any other novel cult or philosophy, and yet dozens of those saw success well beyond "a limited circle." And Christianity often overcame this hurdle without any empirical proof, simply by applying the art of persuasion through learned scriptural exegesis (as we'll see in Chapter 13), arguing that they were the *true* Jews, faithful to the original and enduring vision of the Jewish God. In this respect, Christianity actually had an *advantage* over other cults and philosophies, which could not claim so ancient an oracular foundation (as I explained in Chapter 1).

5. Who Would Join a Moral Order?

Pagans Are Moral People Too

Every scholar of antiquity has noted the broad interest among the ancient Greeks and Romans in philosophies that promoted a strong moral order. Every great philosophy was morally demanding—in fact, that is precisely why they were as popular as they were.[165] As Martha Nussbaum accurately puts it:

> The Hellenistic philosophical schools in Greece and Rome—Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics—all conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life. They saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery.[166]

It's very easy to see, especially examining the letters of Paul, how Christianity fit itself into this paradigm like a glove. It was following in the footsteps of the most popular philosophical traditions of its own day—and improving them, by answering the needs and desires of the lower classes (who far outnumbered the wealthy educated elite), and by abandoning the principles of doubt and freethought the Greeks and Romans had cultivated, replacing them with an absolute conviction and certainty that more people wanted instead (a point I'll examine further in Chapter 17).

It's therefore strange to see Holding claim that Christian ethics were so restrictive that "it is very difficult to explain why Christianity grew" while Jewish converts and sympathizers remained "a very small group." Though Gentile converts to (and supporters of) Judaism were not such a small group as he must think (see Chapter 18), the relevant fact here is that Christianity was *far less* demanding than Judaism (as explained in Chapter 2). Thus, by Holding's own logic, it should have been far more attractive—hence far more successful in winning converts. And it was. It

was a movement whose time had come. A moral vision of a just society was what most people in antiquity longed for. This was supposed to be provided by the laws and social customs, but those were failing, due to corruption at the highest levels—and a growing chaos at the lower levels, as in every region (and especially the cities) different peoples with different customs increasingly mixed and came into conflict. Indeed, by the 2nd century A.D. Roman society had actually codified two different systems of law: one for the rich and privileged and one for everyone else. At the same time, the social and economic needs of "everyone else" were no longer being satisfied.

Enter Christianity. As we've noted, even Tacitus observed how the Jews had created for themselves their own just society of caring for each other like a family. This fact was not lost on the people of the Roman world—indeed, it was envied. And though for some, like Tacitus, that envy bred resentment, for others, like those Gentiles who supported or converted to Judaism, it brought longing. The Jewish "brotherhood" was something many people wanted, and would gladly have joined—if only it wasn't so hard to become and live as a Jew (as explained in Chapter 2).

Thus, Christianity succeeded precisely when it aban-doned all those difficulties, while retaining the ideology of justice and compassion that people most wanted. By making that easier to obtain, joining the *Christian* brotherhood became an attractive option to many people who had become disappointed with the wider society. Yes, to obtain this they had to give things up, including the more liberal sexuality of the age, but this was no greater a sacrifice than the ritual and economic demands placed on them by every other religious movement—in fact, for some (especially women) it was an easier demand to meet. Most pagan cults already required the same or similar sexual purity for limited times, in order to join rituals that procured salvation in this world or the next. In a sense, Christianity merely increased the efficiency of this system: whereas in some pagan cults such rituals might have to be repeated on a regular basis to ensure protection, Christianity simply required a constant state of holiness, thus guaranteeing a constant state of security. For many people this was *less* demanding economically and socially (since it was free and required no time-consuming ceremonies or pilgrimages), and for others it was seen as a better guarantee against a horrible fate in this life or the next.[167] And in exchange for this increased self-discipline, what they got was family,

brotherhood, equity, justice—in short, the joys of community, without the pains of the rat race, insulated from the tribulations of an uncertain and difficult world. Anyone who saw this trade as worthwhile would be inclined to join up. And those were the very people Christianity won over:

> The continuing spread of Christianity, there-fore, was not only due to its offer of goods which pagan "religiousness" had never cen-trally comprised. It was also due to faults in pagan society. In cities of growing social divis-ions, Christianity offered unworldly equality. It preached, and at its best it practiced, love in a world of widespread brutality. It offered certainty and won conviction where the great venture of Greek philosophy was widely per-ceived to have argued itself into the ground. By 250 [A.D.], it was still the persecuted faith of a small minority, but its progress was suf-ficient to reflect on a growing failure of the pagan towns.[168]

So Holding is wrong to suggest that Christianity would have been fatally unpopular because it "didn't offer nice, drunken parties or orgies with temple prostitutes" but instead "forbade them." In actual fact, many pagans frowned upon exactly those things. It's hard to find any elite author regarding them with approval—both drunkenness and sexual dissipation were far more often regarded with scorn. For example, the pagans regarded the Roman sage Musonius Rufus to be the greatest wise man in history, second only to Socrates, and yet Rufus preached essentially the same ethics as the Christians.[169] There *was* a more liberal sexual ethic generally, more or less depending on the community, and to a lesser extent even among the elite. But Holding exaggerates it. It wasn't orgies and booze that most converts were giving up.[170] Those who actually converted saw themselves as escaping the endless frustration, uncertainty and financial expense of sexual politics, which many an individual was willing to give up to better his life and save his soul. Not everyone—but enough to account for the actual scale of early Christian success (which I'll discuss in Chapter 18).

Holding is also making a hasty generalization when he claims "the poor" would not care for Christian communist ideals "if they couldn't spend that shared dough on their favorite vice." Such a statement pretends that all human beings are reprobates. History proves otherwise: many

great traditions of austerity and compassion have flourished, from Buddhism to the Cynicism of Diogenes, without needing empirical proof of any divine miracle. It's true that Christianity probably did not win over any reprobates who were happy with their cursed lives—but like Buddhism, Cynicism, Marxism, it certainly did win over those who (like Justin Martyr) expected more out of life, or who (like Augustine) were tired of the misery of their own sins. And that describes a lot of people in antiquity (as it does today).

Christians Aren’t Perfect Either

Of course, this may even concede too much. It’s an obvious fact that most devout Christians don’t really follow the moral restrictions of their faith. There is as much adultery and sin within the Christian community today as within any other group. And from what evidence we have, of ancient Christianity as well as human nature generally, we have no reason to believe it was any different back then.[171] Many people probably did think they could join Christianity and gain its benefits without paying their moral “membership fee,” and no doubt then, as now, many got away with that—even despite the best efforts of preachers like Paul to restrain the flock. In other words, Holding’s argument assumes people could become Christian *only* by becoming morally austere, which is not true today, and wasn’t then.

In the same fashion, especially by the end of the 2nd century onward, the rich could (and many did) enter the Christian movement for the worldly advantages of power and prestige. There were fewer and fewer opportunities in pagan society for “big men” to lord it over others or enjoy the adoration of crowds, so the opportunity to enter such positions within a well-organized church hierarchy was probably sometimes seized for just that purpose. So, too, for the control of church wealth, much in the same way that corruption has seeped into the power structure of every other communist state—where there are no “rich people,” where in fact that very idea is openly scorned, yet those in positions of authority nevertheless command a vast pool of wealth, and history proves they often behave little differently than if it were their own. Power not only tends to corrupt, but it lures. And once the Church had any real power to offer, its allure would attract sinister men as easily as the Church today attracts pedophiles—and for similar reasons. I don’t wish to imply that this influx of the morally insincere, from among the rich and the poor, was the norm, only that it was certainly an inevitable factor in the rise of Christianity that any discussion of its “success” must take into account.

The Appeal of Communism

But I shall restrict my consideration now only to morally sincere conversion. Even in that context, Holding is wrong to claim Christianity wouldn't have succeeded because "it didn't encourage wealth" but "sharing," since that was actually what made the movement *popular*, especially among those groups it most successfully recruited from. Both the Christians and the Essenes were riding a wave of communist utopian longing that had deep roots in Greco-Roman society, especially among those outside the power structure.[172] The communist Essene communities were attractive for the very same reasons as Christianity: they exchanged uncertainty for security, and loneliness for community, and traded the empty rewards of money and power for the more satisfying rewards of respect and compassion. The latter was even more true by the 2nd century, when wealth increasingly became a burden, as municipalities compelled the rich to engage monstrous financial outlays in support of the community, to the point of causing some wealthy families to flee or go bankrupt.[173] In such an atmosphere, the prospect of instead giving up that wealth in exchange for the security of a religious brotherhood became increasingly attractive, especially when you would enjoy the fruits of that benefaction yourself as a member, and escape the backstabbing world of politics for the comfort of a worldwide friendship.

After all, for many people, especially in troubled times, it becomes clear that their *needs* are far more important than any luxuries, and such needs include the comfort of friendship and community, and equity and justice, besides the more obvious: health and sustenance. So again Holding is guilty of hasty generalization. He says Christianity "would not appeal to the rich" because they "would be directed to share their wealth," but this is too broad an assertion: even if most of the wealthy would balk (and no doubt they did), there were still some who would actually find this attractive, especially considering the rewards being offered, in this life and the next, and the troubled times they found themselves in. And this became more true in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, precisely when Christianity began to win more hearts among the wealthy elite.

Which brings us finally to Holding's strange suggestion that Christianity would be hampered by the fact that "it didn't appeal to the senses" but "promised 'pie in the sky'." It should not need arguing that this was actually an asset, not a disadvantage. By literally promising the world, indeed everything anyone ever wanted—immortality, power (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:3), freedom from disease and want, security from every injury and injustice, and most of all the comfort of a profoundly loving society—Christianity had put a very alluring product on the market. Of course, any movement that could actually provide all those things *here and now* would win *everyone's* allegiance, and in short order. But no such movement existed. So pie in the sky was the only thing anyone had to sell. Thus, it's true that a potential convert needed to be convinced Christianity really had this product in stock, but the real question is: What actually convinced those converts? I'll discuss that in Chapter 13. For now it's enough to note that this same promise was made by many other popular religions at the time, from the cults of Isis or Mithra to the Eleusinian or Bacchic mysteries, and people flocked to them in droves—in fact, a great many more people than came to Christianity in its first three centuries—without needing decisive empirical proof that they really had the goods. So it clearly didn't take much to convince people of that.

In the end, the fact is that most people in the ancient world were miserable. Even at the top there was some discontent, and there was much more within the middle class, and most of all lower down the ladder. And apart from violent revolution (which, for example, the Zealots attempted, but that most wisely saw would always fail), human beings have always had, throughout history, only two strategies for coping with a life of misery and uncertainty: they can seek endless pleasure to dull the pain, or they can seek peace from their miseries by devoting themselves to a moral life of philosophy or religion.[174] We see both strategies applied in the ancient world, across all social groups, as in every other age and culture. Christianity would have appealed to those most interested in the latter strategy. And that segment of society was certainly large enough to account for the entirety of Christianity's success within its first century, and the bulk of its success within its first two or three centuries. Just look at the writings of Tatian or Justin (as in Chapter 13)—moral discontent was the very thing that led them to Christianity.

Conclusion

Rodney Stark provides an excellent summary of my entire argument in this chapter. Stark explains how the moral demands of Christianity ensured that Christians would enjoy the company of morally sincere members, which made membership attractive to those who wanted to avoid the morally suspect. It also made the movement more effective in the beginning, by warding off leeches and parasites and other corrupting influences—thus making Christianity appear more blessed, and able to distribute emotional and material resources more fairly than most other social institutions of the day. Among Christians, you could feel safe, and enjoy the emotional and material benefits of trust. Stark concludes that early Christian churches...

> ...must have yielded an immense, shared emo-tional satisfaction. Moreover, the fruits of this faith were not limited to the realm of the spirit. Christianity offered much to the flesh, as well. It was not simply the promise of sal-vation that motivated Christians, but the fact that they were greatly rewarded here and now for belonging. Thus, while membership was expensive, it was, in fact, a bargain. That is, because the church asked much of its mem-bers, it was thereby possessed of the resources to *give* much. For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, many of them received such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad times. Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, many of them received such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn were loved. And if Christians were required to observe a far more restrictive moral code than that observed by pagans, Christians—espec-ially women—enjoyed a far more secure fam-ily life.[175]

And so it was. Christianity's moral demands were actually an asset, not a hindrance. They made the movement more attractive, more effective, and more successful—for those who actually joined.

6. Who Would Join an Intolerant Cult?

The Popularity of Intolerance

James Holding quotes David DeSilva's comment that "the message about this Christ was incompatible with the most deeply rooted religious ideology of the Gentile world, as well as the more recent message propagated in Roman imperial ideology." Holding concludes, therefore, that Christianity would have been "doomed" without something "to overcome Roman and even Jewish intolerance," and even more, to overcome a popular distaste for the "arrogance and exclusivity" of the Christian's monotheistic, uncompromising salvation doctrine. Hyperbole aside, all this is basically correct—and we'll see later what it actually took to convince people to abandon the most popular ideological assumptions of their day and radicalize themselves (as desperate peoples tend to do) into extreme intolerance (the example of Islam comes to mind).

Holding's conclusion does need some tempering, however. First, in terms of number, we already know a large number of Gentiles had long been attracted to the "intolerant" monotheism of the Jews, and we've demonstrated that Christianity offered all the same goods at considerably less expense (see Chapter 2). Therefore, even with the "stigma" of monotheism, we know for a fact Christianity would have been significantly more successful than Judaism *already was* in winning Gentiles over. Likewise, Christianity's largest gains in its first hundred years came from Jews and their sympathizers, hence the stigma of monotheism had already been overcome within their largest target audience before the Christians even came along. Thus, that stigma was not in fact a large difficulty for early Christianity (we shall discuss the nature and number of converts during the first century in Chapter 18), while other stigmas could be overcome among Jewish audiences with scriptural and moral arguments (we already discussed how Christianity sought to attract Jews in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, and we'll revisit this issue again in several later chapters).

Second, as we've already discussed, outside those groups already embracing monotheism, it was precisely *because* Christianity subverted "Roman imperial ideology" that it won as many converts as it did. That

was a large part of its appeal to the oppressed and disillusioned. Thus, its intolerance in that regard became an asset, not a burden. In the same fashion, it was the increasing failure of popular ideology to meet the needs of Roman communities that Christianity most exploited. And Christian monotheism is the premiere example of the brilliance of this marketing strategy. Pagan ideology was an inevitable failure, as a consequence of statistics as well as human corruption, and Christian monotheism was the perfect “answer” as to *why*.

First: Statistics

Paganism was largely built on the backbone of "votive cult" and equivalent practices: the gods were supposed to help people in the here and now, by bringing justice, peace, health, prosperity, and fertile fields, and (conversely) warding off evil, war, illness, misfortune, and famine. To ensure this, pagan cult involved extensive prayers, rituals, sacrifices, and "vows" ("if you heal my cow, Lord, then I will donate a gold idol to your temple").[176] Since there are no gods, the actual outcome of these efforts is random: your efforts would fail as often as succeed, and divine rewards would "appear" to fall to villain and saint alike, without regard to merit, which was obviously perceived as capricious and unfair.

The pagan system did produce explanations for this. Of course, philosophers like the Epicureans used it as proof the gods don't care at all. But sorcerers claimed to have "spells" that would get the gods in line—for a sizable fee—while holy men blamed these apparently unfair outcomes on all manner of convenient causes, from boons and curses inherited from past lives or ancestors, to some obscure failure of ritual propriety that offended the gods, and so on, which could sometimes be corrected with further rituals.[177] Most people were sufficiently convinced the Epicureans were wrong—since the gods had answered enough prayers to "prove" they were real and responsive—and the "solutions" of sorcerers and holy men were statistically guaranteed to work more often than not, due to the law of regression to the mean. The gods would become responsive, and when they failed again, a new explanation would be offered, and so on it went. This is a trap of superstitious thinking that has been scientifically demonstrated to ensnare even the rational and well-educated today.[178]

Nevertheless, it's easy to see how many would become frustrated by this system. So long as it was the best explanation they had of what was going on, they would stick with it and try to work the system as best they could. But Christians had an alternative explanation: the gods are capricious and fickle because they are *evil*. They are demonic entities out to exploit you through deception and allurements. They are just teasing

you, using you.[179] Instead, if you join "our" community, who worships the one true god, your benefits will be more tangible, fairly distributed, and consistent, thus "proving" that theirs is the true and only just deity.

This was an effective argument, for the evidence bore it out: since the Christian system had *actual human mechanisms* for effecting and distributing benefits fairly, its rate of success was obviously going to be better than chance, and therefore better than all the pagan gods combined. The Christians had a powerful argument on their side. Though we now know this reasoning is fallacious, back then it would have made a lot of sense to a lot of people. Frustrated by the pagan gods, many would find appealing the notion that those gods are perverse. And by offering one supreme deity who is not, the Christians not only explained the pagan's problem, but immediately provided a solution that really appeared to work (especially considering the role miracles played in winning converts, an issue I'll discuss in Chapter 13).

The way the pagan system worked, since the rate of success and failure from nonexistent gods is random, after some failures a success is bound to appear simply by chance, so a sage or sorcerer will tell the disappointed believer that their string of failures was due to a single cause, and then get them working on a "solution." As a result, when the believer finally gets the inevitable success from repeated trying, it will appear as if the sage or sorcerer were right. But in contrast, though Christian prayers for the recovery of a sick Christian will also fail from time to time, they will appear to succeed more often than non-Christian prayers for recovery because the Christian community provides greater help, care, love, and comfort to the sick than the poor (for example) would normally receive otherwise, and these factors increase the rate of recovery among the sick. That we know this difference in recovery rate has natural causes is of course why we don't believe God was responsible, but the ancients, especially the poor, were less cognizant of such a fact.

Likewise, psychosomatic "faith healing" (a known natural effect) would have aided the Christian mission by skewing perceptions of the rate of success as being even greater than it really was. For instance, many people think school violence is out of control because they see several mass school shootings like the tragedy at Columbine, yet these people ignore the actual statistics, which show that school violence has been and remains in steady decline. In other words, focusing on the sensational

gives the false appearance that the general reality aligns with the sensational cases, even when it doesn't. If Christians made a special public show of their faith-healing efforts (as Acts seems to imply they often did, e.g. Acts 3), they may have simply done a better job than pagan holy men of generating the appearance of sensational success. Pagan holy men did not have a unified affiliation, thus it could appear the Christian affiliation had a special power, since it was deliberately advertised as operating successfully in many people (as exemplified in Acts 8). In contrast, the most traditional sources of faith healing were not openly sensational but private, as in the Asclepiad temples where healing "miracles" took place outside public view, and thus could not compete on equal terms with Christian sensationalism or propaganda.[180]

Second: Systemic Failure

Besides the obvious statistical anomaly the Christian message exploited, there was the more pervasive fact of systemic injustice. A large element of pagan religion was communal and served the explicit aim of supporting the power structure. To participate in cult was often to engage your devoted effort toward winning the gods' favor *for those in power*. The idea was that as long as the gods granted good fortune to your leaders, your community would benefit, enjoying peace, justice, and prosperity. Already by the 1st century, and even more in the 2nd, and far more in the 3rd (as we shall see in Chapter 18), this just wasn't cutting it: the powers-that-be were certainly seeing lots of good fortune showered upon them (and their cronies and collaborators) by the gods, but the more this happened, the worse things got for everyone else. The more the masses won the gods' favor for the community, the more oppressed, impoverished, and exploited they became, and the more unjust, corrupt, and insolent their leaders became. No doubt this bred widespread discontent.

Christianity exploited this fact by explaining it: the powers-that-be were unknowingly enjoying the benefits of demonic forces, and the common people were only helping them and thus making things worse. Instead, if the leaders would only turn to the one true god, then they would, like us, bring true justice and equity to all. This, too, was a very potent argument: the early Christians were notably more just and egalitarian in the way they organized their own "society," and it was an easy step of reason to say that, if those in power acted like these Christians, we would be a lot better off. Since the moral order embraced by the Christians was sold, and would often be perceived, as being a result of the blessing of their god (that was, after all, the pagan expectation: the blessing of the gods was supposed to be evident in a blessed leadership, which only the Christians appeared to have), pagans would find their argument rather compelling—exactly the opposite of what Holding assumes.

Demons & Elite Corruption

In response to the above, Holding claimed to "know of no [New Testament] text" where Christians blame corruption and failure among the elite power structure on the elite's worship of demons (meaning, the pagan gods), "much less one that connects it to everyday exploitation of the poor and oppressed." I'm not sure what he means to challenge, though. Is he denying the Christians preached that all pagans worshipped demons? They clearly did preach that (see endnote 4 below). Is he denying the Christians expressed disgust with the moral failures of their society? They clearly preached that, too (ditto). So he must be denying the Christians blamed social evils on the deceptive influence of demons. But if we put the first two facts together, we end up with the third, making sense of Paul's point that "if our gospel is hidden, it is hidden in those who are doomed, in whom the God of this Age," meaning Satan, "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving" so "the light of the gospel would not dawn on them."[181] Since all demons serve Satan, and pagans worship demons (as all pagan gods were), the pagans are therefore blinded by demons. This explains every evil that comes from them, for all unbelievers are "enslaved by those who are in nature not really gods."[182]

And this is certainly what the Christians taught. Jealousy, envy, selfishness, coveting, murder, and strife all come from demons (James 3:14-4:7), from whom the pagans seek rewards through sacrifice (1 Corinthians 10:20-21) because they are deceived (1 Corinthians 12:1-2). It's partly for this reason that idolatry is to be shunned (1 Corinthians 10:6-15). At the same time, the leaders of the world war against God because their demons are deceiving them (Revelation 16:13-14). So the social system of "Babylon" will fail on account of these demons (Revelation 18:2-6), specifically because of the arrogance, selfishness, and greed the demons inspire in the elite (Revelation 18:7-16) through their very demon worship (Revelation 9:20). Greed and avarice are singled out above all, "for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10), and we know selfish greed was the principal fault causing the elite failure to care for the poor and downtrodden. So as Christians saw it,

society was corrupted by idolaters, coveters, and extortioners (1 Corinthians 5:10), hence all among the elite who engage in such injustices are those who worship idols and are doomed, while those who follow the true God will not only be good people (unlike the corrupt among the elite), but will also be saved.[183] The clear implication is that there is a difference in behavior between those animated by God's spirit, and those animated by the "spirit of this world," in other words by Satan and his demons,[184] who at present rule the world, from which fact stems every evil, directly or indirectly.[185] Holding claims to know of no New Testament text claiming these things. Here I have adduced dozens. It seems he is either a liar, or has never even read his own holy book.

The message throughout the New Testament is clear: the corrupt elite worship demons, and from this stems their lust to acquire and extort wealth and deceive and betray others, seeking their own worldly glory instead of the true glory of God. For the idolaters "walk according to the course of this world, according to the Prince of the Powers of the Air, of the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2). In other words, what's wrong with society is that people are following demons. Even as all this transpires according to God's plan, and even as there remain some just men among the elite (by God's will), nevertheless every actual injustice that transpires is ultimately due to the influence and worship of demons rather than the true God. There is no doubt that's what many Christians were preaching. And as I've explained above, that was a very effective way to turn their monotheism into an advantage, rather than a barrier to success.

Managing the Family

Besides the supposed stigma of monotheism, Holding also claims there was some sort of 'filial intolerance' (actual or perceived) that would have prevented Christian recruitment. "Jews and Christians held themselves aloof from public life," he says, "and engendered thereby the indignation of their neighbors." But that's not true. Christians actively engaged the public and were conspicuous in being *open* to all comers, much more than the Jews. Paul, for example, had no problem dining with Gentiles,[186] and it's clear that mixed marriages, between pagans and converts, were not unknown in the early Christian communities, while Christians were told in fact not to shun those outside the church, even if they are sinners.[187] Though the Christians occasionally engaged a certain degree of necessary secrecy (as many cults did), it cannot be said they were ever "aloof" or not open to every neighbor, nor can it even be said (as it was sometimes said against the Jews) that Christians only practiced love and charity among each other. Far from breeding the indignation of their neighbors, Christians struggled in every way they could to *win over* their neighbors, and even failing that, nevertheless endeavored to be kind and open to them (see relevant discussion in Chapter 10).

Social strife did create friction against the Christian mission. As Holding says, "Jewish families would feel social pressure to cut off converts and avoid the shame of their conversion." However, that was only true in those cases where the family didn't follow in a convert's footsteps —which is why Christians recruited heads of household (see Chapter 18). Moreover, Christianity appealed most to those who found the *Christian* family a better deal, and thus were willing to give up the family that frustrated, disappointed, or dissatisfied them, and replace it instead with the ideal family the Christian Church tried so hard to create in its first century of development. This trade-off was even easier for those who had no strong family connections anymore, such as the great number of widows who flocked to Christianity, as well as slaves, and migrants (such as those who were evidently willing to abandon their home towns to travel with Paul)—three groups that could comprise a major portion of

Christianity's early success. Add to them the inevitable many who were discontented with their lives—including their family lives—and early Christianity had quite a sizable base to recruit from (on all these points, see related discussion in Chapter 16).

For everyone else, Christians exploited (or invented) statements by Jesus that lent comfort and rationale to converts who had to give up their family to be saved.[188] Notably, the Gospel that most clearly and frequently articulates this argument, Matthew, is the Gospel thought most directed at a *Jewish* audience. Therefore, the Christians were appealing to people in this very predicament with plausible arguments that some would buy—certainly enough to account for Christianity's actual scale of success among Jews in its first hundred years. Those who would actually find themselves "in this predicament" were those persuaded by the "evidence" the Christians actually had (as discussed in Chapters 7, 13, and 17), or those who wanted something better, or those for whom the system was failing, but who saw family and social connections as the last thing holding them back. Even so, this was not the usual tactic. According to Acts, most Jewish conversions were of entire families, beginning with the head of household, thus largely bypassing the problem of family strife, as everyone would often simply fall in line with their filiarch (see Chapters 10 and 18). And even beyond that tactic, by creating their own social networks, Christians eased the difficulties of social strife, or even reversed them, by offering better families than people already had. So any perceived 'filial intolerance' there may have been was no great hindrance to Christianity.

A Stigma of Atheism?

Continuing the theme of perceived intolerance hindering Christian success, Holding also says that "Jews and Christians alike were accused of atheism." But I'm not aware of any real evidence of that, despite having searched hard to find it. The only sources that ever mention such an accusation against Christians are *Christian* sources. As far as I know, without exception all the actual documents from pagans against Christianity attack it for being a *superstitio*, a vulgar superstition (an excessive 'fear' of God and obsession with the supernatural), *not* atheism. The distinction between these two charges is carefully drawn by Plutarch in his treatise *On Superstition*. Since, as far as I know, those Christians who supposedly responded to the accusation of "atheism" never mention or respond to the accusation of *superstitio*, and yet the latter is the only accusation we ever find in pagan sources, never atheism, it seems the most credible explanation for this incongruity is that the Christians were consistently mistaking what their pagan critics were actually arguing. Arguably no one in early antiquity actually believed the Christians were atheists. Many did believe they held false beliefs about the gods, but that's not the same thing. Likewise, persecution sometimes stemmed from a fear that Christian disrespect for the gods would or did bring ill fortune upon the community, but that's again not the same thing as believing they were atheists, i.e. people lacking belief in *any* god.

However, I have not fully examined the evidence on this point, so if anyone is aware of any primary evidence contrary to my observations so far, please let me know (I can be reached through www.richardcarrier.info). The closest thing to an exception I'm aware of is a singular report that Domitian trumped up a charge of "atheism" as an excuse to punish some family and friends who converted (or were accused of converting) to Judaism.[189] But the context (in both Dio *and* Suetonius, who doesn't mention atheism but says the charges were "trivial") is a list of the *unjust deeds* of Domitian, and therefore reflects an aberration, not a custom. And at any rate, Christians are not mentioned. Though a very late tradition claimed these Jews *were* Christians, there is no reliable evidence

supporting that legend. Suetonius and Dio certainly knew who Christians were, so they would not have confused them with Jews.

Certainly, atheism was not a *typical* charge actually leveled against the Christians, even if it ever was. And they would have had no difficulty refuting it. They *did* have to overcome a popular perception that they were following a depraved foreign superstition, but that was mainly an objection raised by the privileged elite, which they raised against *many* popular cults. It thus can't have been any more a hindrance to Christians than it was to almost any other religion of the era (as already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2). Such perceptions may have limited their penetration of the ranks of the established elite, but since that's exactly what happened (as discussed in Chapter 18), Holding's argument gains no support here.

Which Is It, Jews or Judeans?

Of course, Jews were successfully recruiting Gentiles anyway, so if they were being accused of atheism or intolerance or superstition, that clearly didn't impair their mission much, and as I've repeatedly pointed out (beginning in Chapter 2), the Christians would have been even more successful than the Jews, because they made conversion so much easier (as already noted at the beginning of this chapter).

Once I pointed this out, Holding tried to change his argument by claiming he meant the Romans and Greeks were prejudiced against people 'from Judaea', rather than against members of the Jewish religion. That's absurd, and of course he presents no evidence to support his new claim. All the evidence we have is of prejudice against the Jewish religion and culture, not against their land of origin (see again Chapter 2). Countless Romans and Greeks were even born in Judaea or lived there, and hailing from there was no apparent issue for them or anyone else. Indeed, the Emperor Augustus and Herod the Great (King of Judea) were by all accounts very good friends, and Augustus lavished all manner of goods and honors on Herod and his country, and even passed laws protecting the Jewish religion (as noted in Chapter 4), proving there was no issue of prejudice for him.

Holding can't come up with anything to rebut what I actually said: that prejudice against Jews and Judaism was not universal, and many pagans admired or joined them even despite the perceived intolerance of monotheism. The decrees of Caesar and Augustus protecting the Jewish religion is proof enough of that. The widespread evidence of many Greeks and Romans joining the Jewish faith, adopting Jewish values, worshipping a Jewish God, and revering Jewish heroes and scholars is proof enough of that. Josephus hailed from Judaea and was a Jew, and yet was not a victim of prejudice—to the contrary, the Roman authorities took him into their own. Even the Emperor Titus fell in love with the Jewish princess Berenice, and put her aside only in response to the prejudice of *others*. So the fact remains that though there was prejudice against Jews, this

prejudice was not universal enough to prevent the scale of success Christianity actually achieved in the first century.

Conclusion

As usual, Holding's point—that an alien monotheism was perceived as intolerant and contrary to popular ideology—does explain why Christianity wasn't more successful than it was, especially within its first hundred years. But, also as usual, this factor was not universally strong enough to prevent the scale of success Christianity actually enjoyed. To the contrary, the disadvantages that Holding describes were often quite skillfully turned into an advantage, and actually contributed to its success.

7. Was Christianity Vulnerable to Disproof?

Holding next argues that the Gospel authors, most especially Luke (in both his Gospel and Acts), make so many easily-disproved claims, that they must have been telling the truth, or else their lies would have been exposed and the entire Christian religion discredited thereby. Logically (so the argument goes), the Christian mission depended on making claims (such as regarding the resurrection of Jesus) that could be easily refuted if they were false. That Christianity succeeded entails their claims were not refuted, which entails they were not false. Therefore Jesus really rose from the dead, and the evidence at the time was more than enough to prove that. Therefore, we should believe it now.

General Argument

In the early 2nd century the historian Tacitus observed:

> That everything gets exaggerated is typical for any story .... All the greatest events are ob-scure. While some people accept whatever they hear as beyond doubt, others twist the truth into its opposite, and both errors grow over subsequent generations.

This is true even today. Every story is subject to exaggeration. Many people accept what they hear without investigating the facts, or alter the historical record in various ways and for various reasons. And all these problems only get worse as time goes on. Tacitus knew it. *Everyone knows this*. So it's hard to believe James Holding would try to deny it. False stories succeed and spread all the time, even when diligence could discover the truth.

Tacitus warned us not "to prefer the incredible things that get published and readily accepted, to the truth uncorrupted by marvels."[190] He knew fabulous falsehoods were readily accepted by enough people to be passed on, recorded, and believed, and this happened often enough to greatly annoy more careful scholars like Tacitus himself—and yet historians today find some of his *own* reports dubious. How much worse it must have been for those less careful. There is no ancient history that is entirely accurate and without lies, distortions, or errors. Every qualified historian today agrees with that. It is a universal principle accepted throughout the professional community that no ancient work is infallible. Even the most respected and trusted of historians—Thucydides, Polybius, Arrian—are believed to have reported some false information, especially when it came to private matters witnessed by only a few, and when material was important to an author's personal or dogmatic biases and presuppositions. And the further any ancient author is from these men in explicit methodology, by that much less are they trusted.[191] To claim otherwise, to claim against the widest consensus of experts in the field of ancient history, that any historical source is without misstatement, is an

extraordinary claim. It requires extraordinary evidence. Holding provides none.

This doesn't mean Luke was necessarily a lousy historian. He was certainly better than average when it came to some details—though, even at his best, like all other ancient historians, for each detail he could only be as reliable as his sources. But on top of that we know he lied. For instance, his account of Paul's mission and the division it created in the Church contradicts Paul's own account (in his letter to the Galatians) in almost every single detail, and in a way we can discern was deliberate. And if Luke lied about that, he could be lying about anything else. Moreover, Luke cannot be classed with the best historians of his day because he never engages discussions of sources and methods, whereas they did—and that is a major reason *why* modern historians hold such men as Thucydides and Polybius and Arrian in high esteem: they often discuss where they got their information, how they got their information, and what they did with it. It is their open and candid awareness of the problems posed by writing a critical history that marks them as especially competent. Even lesser historians (like Xenophon, Plutarch, or Suetonius) occasionally mention or discuss their sources, or acknowledge the existence of conflicting accounts, and yet Luke doesn't even do *that*.[192] But despite all that, even if Luke were as honest and reliable as the very best historians of his own day, that would still not be sufficient to carry Holding's point for the *resurrection*.

Holding's argument here not only requires the highly improbable assumption that Luke is infallible (and not importing any assumptions or dogmatic commitments into his reconstruction of the more private events of his narrative). It also requires that most people in antiquity—particularly actual converts to Christianity in its first hundred years—were *also* excellent and studious historians, which is even *more* improbable. There is certainly no good evidence supporting either assumption. We shall examine them in reverse order.

The Problem of Differing Research Paradigms

There is a difference between what ancient people *could* have done (what they plausibly had the *means* to do) and what they actually *did* (what the available research paradigms were, and which paradigms were most widely preferred by the relevant social groups). For example, prospective converts in the 1st century couldn't check newspapers, because those didn't yet exist. Conversely, though they *could* have confirmed miraculous powers using double-blinded placebo studies (the means to do this were certainly available), such a research paradigm did not exist and thus was not conceptually available to them. Therefore, we can be certain neither was done. And this makes an enormous impact on how we interpret ancient claims, in comparison with modern claims.

One might try challenging the first of these facts. For the closest approximations to an ancient newspaper were the *Acta Diurna* (or *Acta Publica*) and the *Acta Senatus*, but these only reported official events at Rome (court rulings, debates, etc.), and only under the direction of the Roman government (i.e. they involved nothing like "journalism," since the ancient world lacked any such thing as journalists, or even police detectives in the modern sense). The *Diurna* were probably painted on whitewashed wooden boards from day to day—in Rome, and possibly each provincial capital—and probably also kept on papyrus in official archives (to which few would have been allowed access—a necessary precaution against the fraudulent theft, destruction, or alteration of government records). Publication of the *Senatus*, on the other hand, was forbidden under the Empire (it was made available only to Senators).[193]

Though I am unaware of evidence for "provincial diurna," it is possible there was such a thing. If there was, certain relevant details could be found in them, such as the appointment of Pilate to Judaea. But after the daily posting, only allowed members of the government would have been able to check, and only in a capital city housing a government archive (and Roman archives in Palestine might not have survived the Jewish War). Moreover, it's highly improbable the trial or sentence of anyone like Jesus or Paul would be mentioned even in a provincial *Diurna*,

since there is no evidence the Romans even *could* have included the thousands of trials involving men of middle or low status (publication of which would have been prohibitively expensive given the technology of the day, and probably beneath the contempt of even the local elite), nor any evidence that they did. And these records would almost certainly never have mentioned anything to do with the resurrection. At any rate, there is no evidence such documents contained any relevant data, or that any Christian convert in the first hundred years (including Luke) had access to any public *Acta* or did access them. So, too, for all other government documents (such as actual trial records, census logs, tax receipts, etc.).

Modern claims, by contrast, have been made in a setting where the technological and practical means to check them—means available even to the common man, much less a scholar or government official—is a thousand times superior, as are the available research paradigms. Therefore, no analogy with the present day is possible. For example, we now know for a fact that miraculous healing can only be confirmed under double-blinded conditions tested against a comparable placebo, and where accurate medical histories are available for those healed, both before and after the "healing" event. For that very reason we cannot trust ancient claims of "miraculous" healing, since the ancient witnesses did not follow the necessary research protocol to rule out placebo and other effects (including fraud, delusion, and exaggeration).

Even when it came to recording what happened, ancient authors employed very different assumptions about what was plausible or probable, and had very different attitudes about what details were acceptable to invent. For instance, it was often acceptable to make assumptions about what was probable and then draw up a narrative that portrayed those assumed details as if they were observed facts reported in one's source—whereas today good scholars endeavor to make clear the distinction between what our sources say and what we deduce or infer, and we certainly eschew any blurring of the line between dramatic narrative and objective history. Yet that line was routinely blurred in antiquity, even by the best historians of the day. This is exemplified by the fact that Thucydides and all his successors felt at liberty to invent entire speeches, based on limited data in conjunction with assumptions about what *they themselves* thought was "probable" (and that would depend on their

religious, ideological, personal, and philosophical commitments). This would never be tolerated today, and with very good reason. Yet this blurring was accepted even outside the construction of speeches, extending to the addition of dramatic and narrative details (as, for example, in descriptions of battles).[194]

F.W. Wallbank, an expert on speeches recorded by ancient historians, concludes that the most reliable speech-preserver in antiquity is Polybius, and yet Wallbank notes that even he "shows perhaps less critical judgment than we are entitled to expect" and "there is no evidence that Polybius' protest" against other historians taking greater liberties "had much effect in changing the current attitude towards writing history" in subsequent centuries.[195] Many scholars likewise find much to distrust in Thucydides' account, for example, of the Melian Dialogue.[196] Thucydides famously described his own method thus: "my practice has been to make the speakers say what *in my opinion* was demanded of them by the various occasions—or what *in my opinion* they *had* to say on the various occasions—of course adhering as closely *as possible* to the general sense of what was really said," insofar as he knew (he preceded this remark by mentioning the general nature of his sources).[197] Few historians were as strict, and it became a fashion soon after to disregard any interest in finding out what was actually said, and instead compose speeches to serve only the rhetorical or aesthetic interests of the author. The fact that some authors attacked this practice only proves how common it was. A nice summary of this point, with bibliography, and specifically assessing the speeches in Acts, is provided by F.F. Bruce.[198] Exceptions even prove the rule. For instance, Bruce cites a counter-example from Tacitus, in which Tacitus gets the gist of a real speech fairly well (even despite considerable literary license).[199] But that can present no analogy, since by the nature of that case Tacitus was working from a physical inscription of the speech, officially produced by the emperor being paraphrased and still available to Tacitus—a situation Luke, for example, could never have enjoyed.

Beside such differences between antiquity and today, there were also differences among the ancients themselves. They differed widely in what they wanted to do, what they knew how to do, and what methods they trusted or distrusted—just as there are differences today, as exemplified, for example, by the insider account provided by Karla McLaren of the chasm between the modern skeptical and New Age movements in terms of

their preferred research paradigms.[200] McLaren demonstrates two particular facts: first, that the modern New Age community strongly prefers to trust emotion and intuition and to distrust reason, critical thought, and skeptical investigation; and, second, that the same community carries significant emotional hostility toward both skeptics and their methods. Skeptics are regarded as arrogant, obsessed with technicalities, and incapable of seeing the real truth, not only because of their arrogance and obsession with facts and logic, but also because of their prior emotional commitment to the dogmas of science and naturalism, 'preventing' them from seeing the truth. As a result, the New Age movement does not listen to scientists or skeptics regarding the best methods to employ in investigating claims, but discards that advice as coming from an untrustworthy source. So there are strong divisions even today regarding which research paradigm should be applied to judging extraordinary claims.

It was the same in antiquity, and the earliest Christians were clearly more analogous to modern New Agers than modern skeptics (as I'll demonstrate in Chapters 13 and 17). So to assess the probability of Christianity's success, we have to know what research paradigm was employed by *actual converts*—not that employed by those who rejected Christianity. For the difference between acceptance and rejection may very well have been a result of adopting different strategies of judgment. This is, in fact, what both modern New Agers and ancient Christians blame as the very reason skeptics reject *their* claims—as we can see, for example, in 1 Corinthians 2: skeptics can't see the truth *because* their methods blind them (I'll analyze this and more such passages in Chapter 17). Therefore, Christians didn't respect those methods. To the contrary, they regarded them as a handicap that one had to discard in order to be saved. Christianity thus appealed to those who rejected the elite paradigm in favor of something else, something (to their mind) "superior."

For that reason we cannot rest any argument on what "we" think "they" would have done. Rather, we must examine the evidence for what they *actually did*. And we have no evidence that any Christian in the first hundred years did anything like what Holding expects as far as "checking the facts" is concerned. So he cannot claim they did do such things when there is no evidence of it. Moreover, when we look at the evidence of what they actually did do, we find essentially the *opposite* of what Holding

claims (as we'll see in Chapter 13). Again, we must not fall into another hasty generalization here. What Greco-Roman writers did cannot be used as evidence of what *all* ancient Greeks and Romans did, much less those who became Christians in the first century. For the literate and scholarly elite belonged to a tiny and unrepresentative segment of the population. Even writers (many of whom were hardly skeptical or rigorous investigators) represent less than one thousandth of one percent of the population—roughly 1 in every half a million people.[201]

Yet there were many gullible or uncritical writers in antiquity, so it is an even hastier generalization to draw analogies from the most scholarly or skeptical of them—especially since we don't have a single known example of such a person converting to Christianity in its first hundred years. We must look elsewhere for analogies, if we want to draw any reliable conclusions about what those converts did before deciding to commit themselves to the faith. Conversely, though we know for a fact that by far *most* people rejected Christianity in its first century, and as far as we can tell *all* members of the scholarly elite did so, we do not have a single record directly from them as to *why*. So we cannot simply "assume" they rejected it for petty or insufficient reasons. They may well have rejected Christianity because they checked the facts and found them wanting.

This puts Holding up against a Catch-22: either the scholarly elite rejected Christianity because they checked the facts and found them wanting (and therefore Holding's ultimate conclusion is thereby refuted: the evidence did *not* hold up under scrutiny), *or* they rejected Christianity without adequately checking those facts—facts that Holding believes would have been "irrefutable" (and yet easily checked). Obviously, Holding must assume the latter. He has no choice. But that means he must suppose that among converts, those who had the best means, methods and drive to check historical facts, failed to do so. It then follows *a fortiori* that everyone else must have done *even less* to check the facts. And that refutes Holding's conclusion that converts would have checked the facts and hence the facts must have held up. We can thus be certain either the evidence didn't check out, or the evidence wasn't strong enough to convince the scholarly elite, or those who actually converted did little to check the facts. Holding must choose one. Yet any choice he makes destroys his case.

I hope not, but I fear Holding might resort to a common slander among Christian intellectuals today and claim that, then as now, all unbelievers (including Jews) are moral reprobates who willfully ignore evidence that they really know is sufficient, in order to avoid the "moral" consequences of belief. Such bigotry has no place in a serious historical inquiry. Holding cannot know there were any such secret psychological motives for ancient Jews and non-Christians (there is no good evidence of this even for modern Jews and non-Christians), and therefore to claim such is not a historical argument, but a mere dogma. On the facts as we know them, there is no reason to suppose any great division in moral values or sincerity between converts and doubters regarding appropriate responses to "irrefutable" evidence.

An analogy can be drawn from ancient astronomy: the real cause of eclipses was well-known and thoroughly understood among the scholarly elite of the Roman period. The Emperor Claudius even had this cause described in a public inscription in order to fend off superstition among the masses. And there are many examples where those in-the-know were able to educate an ignorant public on appropriate occasions. So to discover the true cause of eclipses (lunar and solar) was relatively easy for anyone who cared to ask. Any public library, any elite scholar, and at least one known public inscription would have provided the answer. It was as easily ascertained as any specialized historical fact would have been (such as who held a particular office at a particular place and time). Yet a large portion of the populace never bothered to check, but simply continued believing the myth that eclipses were the work of magic or demons.[202]

If that's how a substantial portion of the population *actually* behaved, Holding cannot maintain Christianity would have hit a brick wall of skepticism. Clearly skepticism against the mythical causes of eclipses was neither widespread nor effective in preventing the success of the mythical explanation—despite the skeptics having very strong evidence on their side. We can expect the same outcome for any other claim, whether supporting Christianity or any other superstition of the age. Yes, there were strong and ardent skeptics. But Christians didn't win them over—at least, we have no evidence of this in Christianity's first hundred years. Rather, during that period they probably won over people like those who blamed eclipses on magic or demons. Holding certainly cannot prove otherwise. In fact, Holding cannot show that those who converted to

Christianity in its first hundred years chose anything like the paradigm of inquiry revealed among the writings of elite scholars, nor can he provide any evidence that any convert who later adopted and employed such a paradigm remained a Christian. There is even a positive case *against* these possibilities, which I'll present in Chapters 13 and 17. But even disregarding that, Holding has not made his case.

So much for the available research paradigms. Now to the issue of ability. How *would* potential converts "check" Christianity's claims, even if they *did* adopt a skeptical research paradigm available at the time?

First, travel was too expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous for most people. No one would bother with it who was not already convinced the trip was worth it. Yet skeptics wouldn't have the motive to engage such risk and expense (and we have no evidence any did), while believers would have little reason to "check" what they no longer doubted (and, again, we have no evidence of anyone in the first century making such a trip in order to "check" evidence, even *after* converting, much less before).

Second, as there was no post office, mail was very impractical—nearly impossible, in fact, unless you knew someone who both knew the person you wanted to correspond with and was traveling there and thus could carry your letter. And even then, few were in the habit of writing back to strangers, and even when they might have, the whole exchange could take several months, given the inordinate length of time required to make the journey and to await the convenience of someone making the trip. Officials would be much easier to reach, but even less likely to respond to someone outside their jurisdiction or on a matter not relevant to their very busy jobs, and the great length of time remained. Accordingly, we have no evidence of any investigative letters being sent by anyone, before or after converting to Christianity, in its first hundred years—much less the thousands of such letters that Holding's argument requires, since numerous converts are supposed to have done this.

Third, access to libraries was greatly limited, and not very useful to a potential Christian anyway. Libraries were rare (only found in major cities), hardly comprehensive, and useful only to the highly literate. Government archives would have been off limits to all but permitted officials (as noted already), and would be unlikely to contain any information that would confirm any evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. And libraries open to the public would in turn contain even less along those lines, since Christian books would not appear in them for at least another century, and we have no evidence any other literature mentioned any facts suggesting Jesus really rose from the dead.

That leaves only one other option: asking neighbors and visitors. Which probably meant asking those who had already converted to Christianity, since few others would know any relevant information, much less believe it. Thus, all a doubter probably had to go on was his or her perception of another convert's sincerity. Such sincerity could be feigned, but even more importantly, testimony could be sincere but based on insufficient evidence, a problem difficult for a doubter to evaluate. The best a skilled doubter could do was engage in a carefully crafted interrogation to explore the actual details known to the reporter, which would not be very welcome (it usually indicated a despised scale of hostility—just as modern-day New Agers respond to such questioning with near-violent indignation) and somewhat limited in what it could accomplish. And even then, such skills of interrogation were not widely learned, nor is there any evidence of any Christian convert in the first century employing such skills before converting, or after.

Even Holding admits, for example, that "people outside the area of Lystra may not have known enough about what happened in Lystra, or wanted to check it." But neither would they have the means to check a claim—much less to check all the crucial details. They would have even less ability to check those details in any way we would consider reliable. They would probably just ask other Christians if it was true—and not question how they knew, nor explore whether their means of knowing was sufficiently thorough and accurate. This is how legends and myths arise even today, as stories get passed on without any critical control. We can be sure this phenomenon would be more common back then.

On the other hand, Holding claims that one would not lie about a "Sanhedrin member, or even a centurion being in your history (even if you don't name them; there were few enough of each of these that it would not be hard to make a check)." But that's not true. There were actually hundreds of such people—and if you've ever tried interviewing a hundred people, you know this is *not* an easy task—and that's already assuming you are physically in their city, and they haven't died or moved, and they will deign to answer your questions. Thus, it would *always* be hard to check for anyone outside of Palestine, and Christianity does not appear to have been very successful there (by far most Jews there remained Jewish, even before the Jewish War), at least as compared with Christianity's success in the Diaspora. Nor do we have any evidence that the relevant claims (to specific Sanhedrists or centurions being involved in any particularly relevant way) were ever made in Palestine. We only have evidence of such claims being made *outside* Palestine and, most likely (following the widest consensus of experts), *after* the destruction of Palestine by war, which made "checking" nearly impossible—and appears to have evaporated any significant Christian presence there anyway. That was the reality, and it does not support Holding's case.

The Problem of Luke's Methods as a Historian

Most of Holding's points pertain to Luke-Acts, and it is certainly true—as all commentators agree—that this is the *only* book in the New Testament that actually belongs to the genre of history. In the words of F.F. Bruce, "of all the [New Testament] writers, Luke is the only one who merits the title 'historian'."[203] Luke alone claims to have written a history (a *diagesis...pragmatô*, "narrative of events," Luke 1:1). Luke alone claims to have done the work of a historian for the purpose of establishing an accurate account (Luke 1:2-3). Luke alone employs any of the distinct markers of the historical genre (such as establishing dates, e.g. Luke 3:1). And Luke's preface consciously mimics those of known histories, and is an important marker of that genre—a marker absent from all other Gospels.

In contrast, the other Gospels seem to fit the genre of mythic biography, in the specialized sense of a 'didactic hagiography', an instructional account of a holy man, identical to the legends of medieval saints or the sacred biographies of men like Pythagoras or Empedocles.[204] The meaning of such texts lay more in universal truths communicated symbolically than in particular claims to historical fact as we understand them today. Certainly, none of the other Gospels employ the markers of historical genre that Luke does. None declare any particular method, or show any historical consciousness (like that of Luke 1:1-4). None attempt to establish the date of any events (in the way Luke does in 3:1). Instead, the Gospel of John begins exactly like a treatise on theology (in fact consciously mimicking Genesis: John 1:1-14), not at all like any history, while Mark and Matthew do not declare their books to be anything that meant 'history', but an *Evangelion* (Mark 1:1) or a *Genesis* (Matthew 1:1). The latter means "Origin" or "Beginning" and the phrase Matthew uses consciously mimics Genesis 2:4 & 5:1, establishing this from the start as a work of theology, not 'history' in Luke's sense. The former, in contrast, means "Good News" or (literally) "Good Message," and Mark identifies immediately what he means: the "Good Message" is the *scriptural* message of the "Messenger" (Mark 1:2), which was already known from

the Bible long before Jesus was even famous,[205] much less risen from the dead, and therefore the 'Evangelion' itself is not a set of historical facts *per se*, but the articulation of a cosmic or salvific *meaning*.

In any case, that the Gospels are mythology I will thoroughly and decisively demonstrate in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*. Whether you agree with that or not, it's still the case that only Luke-Acts bears any definite claim to being a historical account. But was it a reliable account? Colin Hemer has made the most competent attempt to argue that Luke employed the best methods of his own day, i.e. that Luke followed the most reliable research paradigm available to him at the time he wrote (which Hemer tries to argue was the earliest date possible, around 62 A.D.).[206] Some caution is in order, as the claims Hemer made while alive are more tentative and reserved than the claims of his final book on the subject, which in fact was never finished and only completed and published *posthumously*.[207] This presents a problem, since (speaking as a writer and historian myself) it's often the case that an author's conclusions become more reserved and careful in the final edit before publication (sometimes they even change), and therefore the book we have does not necessarily represent precisely what Hemer's actual conclusions would have been. But judging from his earlier work, it's certain his last book at least approximates his final conclusions, even if we can't hold a dead man to the precise wording he never officially approved for publication. Even so, the book as published is still full of great reserve and abundant qualification, and does not assert conclusions so much as assert their plausibility. And already, as to the date of Luke-Acts, more current scholarship has essentially refuted him, placing it's original composition and editing in the early 2nd century.[208]

Hemer's case for the reliability of Luke rests on essentially two kinds of evidence: external corroboration of historical details mentioned in Luke, and evidence that some ancient historians declared and employed very exacting methods. The evidence he presents is generally accurate. But his conclusions do not follow from this evidence, as has been noted by the book's expert reviewers, who all praise Hemer's scholarship and the great value of his book in organizing and presenting a lot of valuable evidence, but who also share the same relevant criticisms. John Lentz says "although promising to deliver a balanced study Hemer is, in this author's opinion, too uncritical of the difficult historical problems," including the fact that,

"unfortunately, not all ancient historians were as exacting as Lucian or Polybius" and so proving the existence of the exacting methods of a Lucian or a Polybius is not sufficiently relevant to Hemer's argument.[209] Lentz also observes that when it comes to Hemer's attempt to make Luke's narrative fit the letters of Paul (since in fact it frequently contradicts them), he "leaves as many questions as answers" and "his argument is so filled with the phrases 'might be' and 'seems feasible'" that what we have is not history, but conjecture. Even Hemer's attempt to claim Luke interrogated witnesses, Lentz notes, "is interesting speculation but seems out of place in this otherwise carefully argued work." Likewise, Hemer's "insistence that Luke completed Acts during Paul's imprisonment in Rome in 62 is not proved." Lentz also says Hemer relies too much on A.N. Sherwin-White without addressing the subsequent scholarship that criticized Sherwin-White's work: including A.H.M. Jones, who once sided with Sherwin-White, but upon examination of the evidence changed his mind, and other "material that is more recent than Jones seems to argue against Sherwin-White" as well.[210] The same conclusions (of both praise and criticism) are reached by Christopher Matthews, who says Hemer's argument "does not emerge with any logical necessity" from the evidence he presents, much of which is "singularly unremarkable" or even "import[s] observations that already assume the historicity of the narrative." Matthews also objects that Hemer's entire argument largely ignores "the possible impact of theological concerns on the composition" (a view shared by Lentz) while in general Hemer's arguments are "at times hopelessly encumbered with dubious suppositions."[211]

I will only briefly address this question myself, since the conclusions of this chapter do not require the assumption that Luke was any worse in producing a history of events than any other decent historian of his own era. All historians of antiquity were fallible, and those of merely above-average talent (like Luke) were particularly fallible, in comparison with the quality of modern history. And most importantly: no historian can ever be more reliable than his sources. Thus, if Luke trusted an unreliable source for any detail, it would not matter how competent Luke was himself.

The first set of evidence Hemer presents does confirm that Luke possessed good skills and knowledge and thus was a competent historian when it came to public and general facts. But this does not prove he was a *critical*

historian, since one does not need to be critical to simply look up public records or local histories and use what they say, or to draw on your own or others' general knowledge of regional details. Nor does this evidence of doing research prove Luke was as reliable when it came to matters that were *not* general local knowledge or available in public records or histories—such as private events requiring the skillful interrogation of witnesses and a critical sifting of conflicting claims. Indeed, the fact that Luke (to a very large extent) simply "trusts" the Gospel of Mark (and the Gospel of Matthew, or Matthew's sources) proves that Luke was not doing much "interrogating" of eyewitnesses at all (and he never says he did—as we'll see below), but was simply pulling material from books and traditions that were never even claiming to be history, much less produced by eyewitness. And even had his sources been written by eyewitnesses, he could not interrogate or cross-examine a book or oral tradition anyway, no matter how skilled he was. And when we consider that evidence, in addition to the fact that Luke shows (or pretends to show) no awareness of conflicting stories (like the deviant nativity or empty tomb narratives of Matthew), and never makes any effort to show how he chose what evidence to accept or reject, we can rightly say that Luke was probably *not* a critical historian.

This brings us to Hemer's second set of evidence. He does demonstrate, and quite rightly, that the best historians of the age employed very discerning methods that allow us to trust them more than most other writers of antiquity. But there were also many lousy historians who did not engage such methods, or who employed them with little skill. Hemer himself proves this, since much of the evidence for the reliability of such historians comes from their criticisms of the sloppy or unreliable methods of *other historians*. Thus, proving there were good historians does not permit the conclusion that Luke was one of them. Nor does Hemer's first set of evidence permit such a conclusion, since evidence of exacting research is not evidence of *critical* research. Moreover, as the renowned biblical commentator C.K. Barrett wisely pointed out in a review of another book attempting the same argument, "It is enough to remark that the reviewer has read a large number of detective stories which were completely correct in their description of legal and police procedures—and pure fiction."[212]

Hemer's logic is marked by a rather prominent and important gap. Unlike *all* the best historians of the day, Luke never names any source (except two documents irrelevant to the divinity of Jesus), and never offers any methodology, nor shows any interest in a critical assessment of any evidence at all—even though it's precisely on such details that modern scholars base their evaluation of ancient historians! It's also notable that, unlike Luke, all ancient historians *told us who they were*, which alone tells the reader something of their qualifications. And in a few cases (as with Josephus and Appian), ancient historians even listed their specific qualifications as an expert on the events they relate. Luke's preface is conspicuous for the absence of *all* this information, and thus looks more like the work of a very *un*critical historian—the exact opposite of Hemer's desired conclusion. A close analysis of Luke's preface (Luke 1:1-4) carries the point:

> Since many took it in hand to bring together a narrative of the events assured among us, ac-cording to what they handed down to us who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the story, it is also my pleasure to write to you, most excellent Theophilus, in an organized way, so you may assess the truth of the stories you were told about in person, since I have closely followed everything accur-ately from the start.

What does Luke actually say here? First of all, he does not say he spoke with any eyewitnesses, or even knew them. Secondly, Luke does not say he did any kind of critical research, but quite the *opposite*.

As to the first observation, Luke only says the eyewitnesses handed down the information (1:2), not that Luke was the direct recipient of anything from them (nor even that the others were, either, whom Luke says were compiling similar stories)—for he writes *paredosan hêmin*, "handed down to *us*," i.e. the present generation of Christians, not Luke specifically. There is no connotation here that Luke interrogated or even *knew* those witnesses. And it's unlikely Luke meant to include himself as a "witness" in the "events fulfilled among us" (*peplêrophorêmenô en hêmin pragmatôn*), since the *hêmin* logically includes the addressee (Theophilus, Luke 1:4). In this context, *hêmin* must mean "us Christians" as a community or brotherhood—for the eyewitnesses are the ones who

delivered this information “to us” in the next verse (1:2). So the “us” in 1:1 does not mean “those witnesses and me,” but the same thing as the “us” in 1:2—every Christian of the present day. Even Hemer agrees with that.[213] Moreover, Luke doesn’t actually say the events “took place” among us, but that they were “fulfilled” among us—literally “were fully assured” or “were fully satisfied.” This is a crucial distinction readers must not lose sight of: he is talking about events that are *asserted* (“assured”) among us, and hence is referring to a tradition, not experience.[214]

As to the second observation, Luke says he *followed* some unnamed and unidentified sources *closely* and *accurately*—in other words all but slavishly. Nothing here connotes any sort of critical judgment by Luke in our sense, much less that he tried to reconstruct the true story himself by sifting and analyzing conflicting documents and accounts. To the contrary, the connotation is quite the opposite. Luke is saying that others have taken it upon themselves to “set in order” the very things the eyewitnesses handed down—and “to write” these things down “seemed a good idea to me, too.” The verb *anatassô* means “bring back together” and thus “rehearse” or “recount,” which can mean orally or in writing. That Luke says “me, too” might imply some of the accounts he is referring to were written (and we know for a fact at least one of them was, since he clearly used the Gospel of Mark as a major source), but he might simply have meant that organizing and relating the stories was a good idea he shared. Either way, Luke clearly intends to put himself in the company of these unnamed ‘others’ (he is certainly not criticizing them).

Luke is saying that what he has written down, and what others have brought together from the tradition that was handed down, is a collection of stories (*logoi*) that Theophilus has already heard about (literally: *katêchêthês* entails hearing it spoken, not reading it). The reason Luke gives for doing this (writing everything down “in an organized way”) is so Theophilus can “assess the truth” of what he has already heard. The verb *epigignôskô* means literally “to look upon, witness, observe,” and by extension to “recognize” or “take notice of” (and by further extension: “find out about,” “discover”). It does not mean “to know” as is often translated. But it often means, when coupled with *peri* (as it is here), “come to a judgment about,” hence “judge the truth about the stories you heard.”[215] I use the more ambiguous “assess” to reflect the actual ambiguity in the Greek: Luke is either asking Theophilus to “take notice

of" or "look over" the truth of the stories, or "to make a judgment" about it, or both. And that's the point of Luke's emphasizing the closeness, "accuracy," and thoroughness ("followed everything from the beginning") of his own account. He means he is not being inventive or sloppy, but is making a precise record of what was handed down (perhaps more precisely than others). That did not require critical historical judgment. In fact, it rules it out: for he is declaring his unwavering commitment to a prior tradition—which he is "following closely" and "precisely." His only stated criterion of judgment is what was handed down from the beginning—and yet he says nothing at all about how he determined which stories met that criterion and which did not. So we are left with no evidence at all that Luke employed anything we would trust as a reliable critical method.

Some scholars (whom Hemer cites but does not commit to) take some of the key words here out of context in an attempt to change their meaning in Luke.[216] For example, some cite a passage in Josephus' tract against Apion.[217] But the context there does not support the conclusion that the same two words in Luke mean 'doing critical research'. The adverb *akribôs* literally means "sharply" and thus by extension "precisely," "exactly," or "strictly." By itself it only means "accurately" in *those* connotations—*not* in the English sense of analyzing disparate evidence and figuring out the truth. For example, it is the antonym of *haplôs* ("loosely") and *typô* ("roughly" or "in outline").[218] Therefore, the fact that good historians demand an *akribôs* investigation only means they expect it not to be sloppy or rough, but exact. For example, in the above passage Josephus includes 'accurately' following the Old Testament scriptures as an example of doing *akribôs* history, and in general his point is that you must follow the evidence and sources exactingly. He is not referring to critical analysis. Moreover, while Josephus does discuss sound methods in this passage, Luke does *not*, and just because Josephus demanded a good method in order to be *akribôs*, it does not follow that Luke did as well. Rather, in the context of *Luke's* use of the word, it refers to following the handed-down stories with precision, which is like Josephus following the handed-down stories of the Old Testament with precision.

The other key word is the verb *parakoloutheô*, which literally means "follow closely" and has no connotation of critical analysis or interrogation.[219] For example, when Josephus uses this word in the passage against Apion, he forms the phrase "having been close to what happened"

(i.e. “having followed the events” and thus being one who himself “knows”). But this is understood only from the context, where he distinguishes that from asking *others* who “know.” In contrast, when Luke uses this word, the context makes such a reading impossible—since Luke was *not* close to “everything from the beginning” but is one of the “us” to whom everything was “handed down” by those who were. And unlike Josephus, Luke makes no distinction between asking those who know (he never even mentions doing such a thing at all) and being one who knows (and he never says he was such a person, and even implies he was not). Therefore, how Josephus used the same word cannot help us understand Luke’s use of it, because the precise context is different. And whereas Josephus tells us his underlying assumptions about method, Luke does not—so we cannot assume Luke shared similar assumptions.

Contrast all this with just one example, how Suetonius handles the existence of conflicting accounts of the birth of Caligula.[220] Luke shows no such interests, methods, or skills, and presents no such efforts to us, nor names or assesses any sources pertaining to Jesus. Even outside the subject of Jesus, Luke only identifies and quotes two sources, neither of which contain anything relevant to the life, resurrection, or divinity of Jesus: an essentially anonymous church decree (Acts 15:23-29) and a government letter by Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26-30, which oddly doesn’t even name its subject, Paul). And there are significant disagreements in the manuscripts as to the contents of both: dogmatic alterations were made to the decree (esp. to Acts 15:24 and 15:29), and (among other things) the words “a certain Jesus” were added to verse 29 of the letter of Lysias in later manuscripts, thus “inventing” an official Roman reference to Jesus. And yet when it comes to reporting actual facts about Jesus, Luke doesn’t even identify any sources at all (not even the one we know he used, the Gospel of Mark).

This contrasts quite sharply with Suetonius, and yet Suetonius is notoriously regarded by modern historians as an often-unreliable gossipmonger. Therefore, *a fortiori*, we have every reason to expect Luke was no better, and probably worse, when it came to critical acumen. Here is the relevant passage from Suetonius, and one can only marvel at how incredibly different from Luke the method of Suetonius is in the writing of history:

Gaius Caesar was born the day before the Kalends of September in the consulship of his father and Gaius Fonteius Capito. Conflicting testimony makes his birthplace uncertain. Gnaeus Lentulus Gaetulicus writes that he was born at Tibur; Pliny the Elder, that he was born among the Treveri, in a village called Ambitarvium above the Confluence. Pliny adds as proof that altars are shown there, inscribed "For the Delivery of Agrippina." Verses which were in circulation soon after he became emperor indicate that he was begotten in the winter-quarters of the legions: "He who was born in the camp and reared mid the arms of his country, Gave at the outset a sign that he was fated to rule." I myself find in the *Acta Publica* that he first saw the light at Antium.

Gaetulicus is shown to be wrong by Pliny, who says that he told a flattering lie, to add some luster to the fame of a young and vainglorious prince from the city sacred to Hercules; and that he lied with the more assurance because Germanicus really did have a son born to him at Tibur, also called Gaius Caesar, of whose lovable disposition and untimely death I have already spoken. Pliny, on the other hand, has erred in his chron-ology—for the historians of Augustus agree that Germanicus was not sent to Germany until the close of his consulship, when Gaius was already born. Moreover, the inscription on the altar adds no strength to Pliny's view, for Agrippina twice gave birth to daughters in that region, and any childbirth, regardless of sex, is called *puerperium*, since the men of old called girls *puerae*, just as they called boys *puelli*.

Furthermore, we have a letter written by Augustus to his granddaughter Agrippina, a few months before he died, about the Gaius in question (for no other child of the name was still alive at that time), reading as follows: "Yesterday I arranged with Talarius and Asil-lius to bring your boy Gaius on the fifteenth day before the Kalends of June, if it be the will of the gods. I send with him besides one of my slaves who is a physician, and I have written Germanicus to keep him if he wishes. Farewell, my own Agrippina, and take care to come in good health to your Germanicus." I think it is clear enough that Gaius could not have been born in a place to which he was first taken from Rome when he was nearly two years old. This letter also weakens our confidence in the verses, the more so because they are

> anonymous. We must then accept the only remaining testimony, that of the public record, particularly since Gaius loved Antium as if it were his native soil, always preferring it to all other places of retreat, and even think-ing, it is said, of transferring thither the seat and abode of the empire through weariness of Rome.[221]

This is how a critical historian behaves. His methods and critical judgment become *transparent* and laid out for the reader to see. He names, or at least mentions or describes, his sources. In this particular case, Suetonius identifies Gaetulicus, Pliny the Elder, the *Acta Publica*, and the letters of Augustus, as well as an anonymous oral tradition and a public inscription at Ambitarvium, all in addition to "the historians of Augustus." He analyzes the conflicting claims and tells us how he decided on one over the other—indeed, it is already important that he tells us there *were* conflicting traditions. He lists the evidence and criticizes it. He gives us information about the reliability of his sources—for instance, he tells us when a source is anonymous, and admits that's a mark *against* it, and he tells us what evidence any given author appealed to, and remarks on their possible motives. He quotes documents or sources verbatim. And he is openly attentive to chronological inconsistencies.

Luke does *none* of these things. He never even mentions method, much less shows his methods to us, or any critical judgment at all. He never names even a single relevant source, nor does he give us anything like a useful description of any of his sources, and he certainly never tells us which sources he used for which details of his history, or why. And Luke must surely have known there were conflicting claims, yet he never tells us about them, but instead just narrates his account as if everything were indisputable, never once telling us how or why he chose one version or detail and left out others. For example, though Luke copies Mark, he never tells us he did, much less for which material, and he changes what Mark said in several places. This entails either that Luke is fabricating, or preferring some other source that contradicted Mark. So why don't we hear of this other source? Or of why Luke preferred it? Likewise, it's impossible to believe that Luke "closely followed everything" and yet had never heard of the alternative nativity account presented in Matthew (unless, of course, Matthew wrote after Luke and made it all up). Moreover, Luke tells us nothing about the relative reliability of his sources

—for instance, he never identifies what (if anything) came from anonymous sources, nor does he ever show any interest in distinguishing good from bad evidence or certain from uncertain information. For example, why did he trust the Gospel of Mark in the first place? Who actually wrote it? What methods or sources did its author use? Luke doesn't say. He never even *quotes* any history, nor shows much concern for establishing a precise chronology—essentially giving us only a single explicit date (in Luke 3:1), which is tied only to John the Baptist and is thus ambiguous regarding any event in the life of *Jesus*.

All the elements that lead us to trust an ancient historian are *missing* from Luke. Therefore, Luke cannot be elevated to their level. He may well be an accurate historian. But that does not make him a *critical* historian. Only content like that of Suetonius above can identify a critical historian from a merely accurate one. Still, the quality of Luke as a historian need not be denied here—on matters that could be publicly checked, he may well have been impeccable. That does not mean his information on private matters transmitted solely by hearsay through an unknown number of intermediaries was as good, or that he did not import his own assumptions when describing details or crafting speeches. Yet *all* the evidence pertaining to the resurrection was private, not public, and was the central focus of dogmatic disputes—and therefore, of all things, the one detail most prone to distortion by importing the dogmatic assumptions of the author. And this is a crucial distinction—between public and private knowledge, and incidental vs. doctrinal data—a distinction Holding does not appear to grasp, as we'll soon see from his own prize examples.

There are additional problems, of course. As I already noted, unlike other historians of his day, Luke never even tells us who he is. And unlike all *good* historians of the day, who often say when they were eyewitnesses or mention who they got details from when they weren't witnesses themselves, Luke never says he knew even Paul, much less traveled with him. Such a conjecture arose only a century later, probably from the fact that in three places involving journeys at sea the narrative of Acts speaks in the first person plural ("we"). Maybe that does mean the narrator (or his source) was with Paul on those journeys—but we are not told this, nor told who the narrator was, or what his relationship was to Paul. And commentators can't agree on what to make of all this, since there are many arguments weighing against Luke being a companion of Paul, and for the

"we" passages being a literary device.[222] As Acts-specialist C.K. Barrett concludes, "the differences and problems ... are more than sufficient to cast doubt on the identification of our author with a Pauline traveling companion."[223] He notably adds: "Luke's use of technical vocabulary suggests, if anything, that he was not a doctor [as some claim] but a sailor."[224] Likewise, in Ernst Haenchen's opinion, "the 'we'" in certain passages "has been inserted in order to lend the narrative of the voyage the appearance of a fellow traveler's account" and "was in fact used here as a stylistic device," a conclusion now all but proven by Dennis MacDonald.[225]

An even bigger problem is the fact that there are two significantly different versions of Acts, a Western version and an Eastern version, both equally ancient, and both showing signs of editing by later scribes. Indeed, the Western text is 10-20% longer, and "the early witnesses for the text of Acts diverge more than those of any other New Testament writing" according to John Polhill (some examples of this deviation we already saw above).[226] So it's quite possible some historical details (including precise terminology), as well as material of crucial dogmatic importance (e.g. data pertaining to the nature of Christ's resurrection), were *added* by someone other than the original author. The manuscript evidence in fact is so problematic that it has led some scholars to argue that Luke wrote two versions of Acts, or that he never finished it, and only left disorganized or incomplete notes that later scribes, eventually in two separate traditions, put together into a coherent and polished form. Whatever the case, all these problems make our situation even worse with regard to asserting the reliability of the received version of Luke-Acts.[227]

Yet even setting all that aside, the evidence of Luke's methods still fails to support Holding, as the following examples prove. His case is merely weaker still when we consider the problems above as well.

First Example: Luke on Paul's Trial

The gist of Holding's argument here is that "the [New Testament] is filled with claims of connections to and reports of incidents involving 'famous people'," which no one would have allowed had those famous people not really been involved, which in turn somehow entails the *other* details (the private experiences of converts and disciples) must be as reliable. There are two non sequiturs here: getting the public details right in no way entails the private details are also true (since the skills and methods required in each case are very different, as is their respective 'checkability'), nor could potential converts have really checked the public details anyway. I've addressed both points already from a general perspective (above). Now we can examine them from a specific example, which is clearly Holding's prize case, since he launches his entire argument with a quotation from the relevant scene: Paul's trial before Agrippa.

Right from the start we have grounds for suspicion: Holding avoids calling our attention to the fact that despite all these "connections to and reports of incidents involving famous people," not a single famous person was a witness to *any* of the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. To the contrary, that one claim remained private and uncheckable, even by those who might have had the means and desire to "check up" on all those "connections to and reports of incidents involving famous people." Holding is thus guilty of arguing from a giant red herring. Nor does that red herring lead to any of the other conclusions Holding wants to draw from it. That's the subject of the present section.

Holding's representative title quote comes from Acts 26:26, where Luke has Paul say at trial before Agrippa: "For the king knows about these things, to whom I am speaking freely. For I don't believe any of these things are hidden from him, since this has not been done in a corner." Holding implies that Paul is referring to the resurrection, but that's clearly not the case (as we'll see). And even if he were referring to the resurrection here, this would not suffice to make Holding's case. For there was no such thing as a trial transcript for anyone to 'check' to confirm

Paul actually said this (the official court documents we've recovered for other trials include only brief, formal statements of witnesses, not lengthy speeches—we only have unofficial versions of the latter). Though we could imagine Luke was there himself or heard all about it from Paul or some other witness, we can't be sure Luke or his sources are giving us a totally honest or accurate account. Since no one would be able to check exactly what Paul said to Agrippa, Luke or his source could pretty much make up whatever they wanted to. It was impossible to check.

Already this point is fatal, but we'll set it aside. Holding asks, "Did Agrippa execute Paul for these statements? No, and he could not have if it was true."[228] Holding's point is that Paul could not claim "none of these things are hidden" from Agrippa if that was untrue, since Agrippa could execute him for perjury, therefore the evidence must have been so public that Agrippa himself was familiar with it. I'm not sure Agrippa had the authority to execute a Roman citizen (whether for perjury or anything else), much less someone who had already filed an appeal. But let's assume he could for the sake of argument. The question remains: what "business" is Paul referring to that was "not done in a corner"? What are these "things" that Agrippa knows about and aren't hidden from him? Does anything Luke claims Paul asserted at this trial, which Agrippa "knows" is true because it was "not hidden" from him, have anything whatever to do with whether Jesus actually rose from the dead? No. Does Paul's defense, so far as Luke records it, even contain any historical assertion that would support the historicity of the resurrection? Again: No.

Take a close look at what Luke actually claims Paul declared to Agrippa at this trial: Paul has long been a devoted Pharisee (26:4-5); he was being accused of merely "hoping" for the fulfillment of scripture (26:6), even though all Jews share the same hope (26:7), which is the hope that God will raise the dead (26:8); Paul persecuted Christians (26:9-11), but then saw a blinding celestial voice from God at noon on the road to Damascus (26:12-18), and he obeyed the commands of this voice and preached its message "to repent and turn to God and do works worthy of repentance," first in Damascus, then Jerusalem, then "all Judaea," and then to the Gentiles (26:19-20, though incidentally we know Luke is lying about this, since we have Paul's own word on the subject in Galatians 1:15-2:1); the Jews seized Paul for preaching *this* message (26:21), and now he's on trial, "saying nothing but what both the prophets and Moses said was destined to

happen” (26:22). Not a single reference to the resurrection of Jesus. Every single fact here could be true, even provable, yet none are of any relevance to Holding’s argument. And these are the only “things” Paul says Agrippa “knows” because they are not “hidden” from him.

Only at the very end of his defense does Paul mention the death and resurrection of the Messiah (26:23), yet only as what “the prophets and Moses said was destined to happen,” not as an observed event. Neither Christ’s death nor resurrection is asserted anywhere in Paul’s defense before Agrippa. Paul never says he is innocent because Jesus really rose, “and here is my evidence that proves it.” No, all he appeals to is a *private* communication *direct* from God only to *Paul himself* affirming that the Savior lived (26:15), plus statements from “Moses and the prophets” concerning "*whether* the messiah *was destined* to suffer and proclaim” a message of salvation to the world—not that any Christ *has* suffered or proclaimed anything.[229] Paul never asserts that, nor claims that such an assertion was anything he preached, or what he was being accused of preaching! His defense asserts only that he was preaching that scripture foretold such a thing and “therefore repent.” That Paul is being portrayed as deliberately shy about asserting anything beyond what scripture says is clear from the carefully chosen words here: the particle *ei* is used here, yet is always used “to express a wish ... usually either in conditions, *if*, or in indirect questions, *whether.*”[230] Likewise, the word *mellei* is employed here, which means “about to happen,” “going to happen,” “is intended to happen,” or “is destined to happen,” always looking forward to a future time, even if only the immediate future.[231] Thus, Paul expresses the resurrection of Christ to Agrippa as a wish for the future attested in scripture, not as an actual event of the recent past.[232] That’s actually a brilliantly slick defense: Paul deliberately avoids asserting anything that any reasonable Jew would doubt, and thus avoids giving cause to Agrippa or his accusers to “investigate” the facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, contrary to what Holding implies, this speech actually entails Paul could *not* prove the resurrection of Jesus (much less offer “irrefutable” evidence of it).

Of course, we can assume Paul believed this “predicted resurrection” was an actual event that was already fulfilled, but he still did not say this to Agrippa, or even that this was a claim Paul was accused of making. He carefully kept that whole debate out of court. Consequently, the only

rebuttal Festus could offer is that Paul had “gone mad” (26:24-25). Festus does not bring in any rebuttal witnesses or challenge any evidence, because no relevant evidence was presented, nor indeed was any controversial evidence mentioned that anyone could have been a witness to—except Paul. Hence the only thing anyone *could* accuse him of was insanity. There was no way to prove he was lying about a private vision. At most, Festus could have inquired as to what Paul’s unnamed companions saw, or indeed who they even were. But Festus doesn’t even do that. So though Paul says some nameless “those who journeyed with me” fell to the ground with Paul when he saw the vision (26:13-14), they are not there to testify, nor is Agrippa even told who they were, nor does Agrippa even ask to interrogate them, much less actually do so. Nor does Festus. Indeed, Paul carefully avoids saying those with him actually saw or heard anything —even though Luke says this on *other* occasions (Acts 9:3-8 and 22:6-11). That’s another slick move. On the legal record, if Luke has it right, Paul claimed nothing miraculous whatsoever except a personal experience that no one could confirm or refute, even in principle. Paul never says “why” those with him fell (and indeed, Luke says elsewhere that Paul claimed they remained standing, in Acts 9:7), thus *implying* something supernatural yet leaving himself a mundane explanation (if the witnesses were produced, Paul could simply say they dropped down to pick him up). All in all, there isn’t a single thing here that supports the claim that Jesus actually rose from the dead.

So when Paul says of Agrippa that none of “these things” is “hidden from him,” not one of “these things” is the resurrection of Jesus, or any miracle at all. It’s just not anything Paul asserted as a historical fact in this trial. His only reference is that scripture predicted it (26:22-23), hence Paul begins his defense by calling attention to Agrippa’s thorough knowledge of the scriptures (26:3), not to any other evidence or witness. Paul never tells Agrippa that the resurrection of Jesus is something that happened, beyond what God told him privately, nor does Paul make any case proving it did. We certainly have no reason to believe Agrippa ever saw the resurrected Christ—or even inspected the empty tomb for that matter, or so much as asked about that. Why would he? Paul never mentions it. Or anything else pertaining to the resurrection. And when Paul makes his final appeal, he does not ask Agrippa, “Do you agree the evidence confirms that Jesus rose from the dead?” but instead “Do you believe the

prophets?” (26:27). That’s it. Scripture. The facts of the resurrection aren’t even on trial. They aren’t even an element of Paul’s defense. Hence Agrippa’s ruling is not that Jesus rose from the dead. His ruling is solely this: that Paul violated no law in preaching that scripture predicted the Savior would rise from the dead (26:30-32). Yet even an atheist can agree with that!

Holding's Argument Backfires

Even setting aside the fact that Paul's statement to Agrippa says nothing about the resurrection of Jesus, the trial (as Luke records it) actually *refutes* Holding's argument, and by his own reasoning. Agrippa may have been joking when he said "you are quickly persuading me to become a Christian" (26:28), but it's more likely he never said it. Ancient historians often fabricated such details to make a good story. Moreover, Agrippa most likely thought what Paul had defended in the trial *was* Christianity—for there was no blasphemy in agreeing with the claim that "Moses and the Prophets predicted the suffering and resurrection of the messiah, therefore repent." But whatever the case, the record shows Agrippa *did not convert*. So the fact is, Agrippa was unconvinced—despite having more resources to check the facts than any actual Christian convert ever did. Thus, if the facts were checkable and overwhelming, Agrippa should have converted. That he did not entails the facts either weren't checkable or weren't overwhelming. Holding's case is thereby destroyed.

The same problem arises when we look at Paul's story. Holding's argument here makes no sense whatever of why Paul persecuted Christians. Why would he have persecuted them so vehemently if the evidence for the resurrection was already as extraordinarily good as Holding's argument requires? Why does Paul only believe *after* he himself sees a vision of the Christ telling him he's wrong? Why does Paul *never* mention *any* other reason for converting? Even in Acts, he never cites any evidence as having convinced him, *except* his own personal vision (besides the scriptures, of course). He never makes any references to checking the facts of the empty tomb story, or being persuaded by the testimony of other witnesses—not even in Galatians. In fact, in Galatians 1 Paul goes out of his way to repeatedly *deny* having done any such thing until, at best, many years after he was already fanatically converted. So why did it take a personal visit from God to convince Paul? We cannot say he was loopy or stupid—from his letters we can see Paul clearly was neither. There can be no plausible explanation for his not believing the Christians *except* the fact that he had no reason to believe them. Which entails there was no evidence

that could be checked at all, or what could be checked was inconclusive to any reasonable man like Paul.

And Paul was not alone: Israel in general was hard to convert, as Paul himself admits (in Romans 11:25-31), and there is no reliable evidence the Church was actually all that successful in Palestine in the first century. I'll discuss this in Chapter 18, but for now it's enough to note that Judea, much less Jerusalem or Galilee, did not become Christian to any notable degree. That pretty much entails the evidence for the resurrection was *not* irrefutable—not by a long shot. Nor was even a single elite scholar of the first century persuaded to convert. Had they been, the history of Christianity would have been very different. Its literary tradition would have begun under the pen of famous names and great men, instead of obscure unknowns (like Paul) outside (or subservient to) the main avenues of power and influence. Vast monetary resources would have been wielded in its support from the beginning, which means (as it did for all other schools and cults that won the support of the wealthy) inscriptions professing the Gospel all over the Empire, even audiences and correspondences with the Emperor. Instead, the Christians couldn't even persuade the *local* elite in Jerusalem, much less anyone higher up the ladder. Not a single member of the Sanhedrin was persuaded (despite the fact that they were in the best position of anyone to collect and assess Holding's alleged "irrefutable" evidence), nor anyone of the local decurion class at all (i.e. "councilmen," Jews of sufficient social standing to have a right to local political power).[233] The evidence, therefore, could not have been "irrefutable."

Aristides and Justin Martyr (both early-to-mid 2nd century) are the first elite scholars to convert on record—hence anything like academic Christian literature (where deliberation regarding the truth of Christianity is significantly transparent as to both methods and sources) begins only with them and no sooner, and does not reach high levels of critical skill (comparable to that of elite skeptics) until Clement of Alexandria and Origen (late 2nd & early 3rd century). Justin and Aristides converted between 120 and 140 (hence roughly a hundred years after Christianity began), and are the first converts known to have engaged a careful examination of the available options before converting (as I'll discuss in Chapter 17).[234] There were other literate Christians who wrote treatises in the early 2nd century but we know too little about their educations or even

their literary works. And there were other elite scholars writing among the Christians after Aristides and Justin, but only decades after their respective conversions.

There are, of course, the dubious legends of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea each being a "Disciple" of Jesus by some accounts,[235] but neither was converted by evidence of a resurrection, and there is no evidence either remained a convert after the Disciples claimed Jesus rose from the dead (both men are conspicuously absent from Acts). I already discussed Nicodemus in Chapter 2. As for Joseph, even supposing he was a real person, it's unclear what his status was supposed to be. John doesn't say. Matthew only says he was "rich" (yet a "rich man" was *supposed* to attend the Messiah at his burial according to Isaiah 53:9, so this detail might be fabricated). Mark says he was a councilman (*bouleutês*) of good reputation "who was also seeking the Kingdom of God himself." Luke alone can be taken as alleging he was a member of the Sanhedrin (the council of Jerusalem), but it would be unusual for a citizen of Arimathea to sit on the council of another city, and Luke does not actually say he did (only that he did not agree with their decision). Therefore, if he was a *bouleutês*, he was probably a member of the council of Arimathea. Still, that would at least make him a member of the decurion class. However, like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea is utterly unheard of outside the Gospels, which is impossible: had any such person really converted (and the Gospels do not agree he did), his financial and political influence would have been central to the history of Christianity—and could not have failed to be a prominent theme in Acts, for example. This, plus the fact that Joseph is not a convert in the earliest Gospel account, is sufficient to conclude that he probably did not convert. And even if he had, he clearly converted *before* having any evidence of Christ's resurrection, and therefore his conversion can prove nothing about *that*. At most, he could perhaps have later attested to the empty tomb, though he inexplicably vanishes before it's even discovered, never to appear again—and we have no evidence anyone, Jew or Christian, ever found him or sought him out to check his testimony.

Indeed, Holding's own argument backfires here again. For why would Luke leave this Joseph out of Acts, unless Luke felt he could not get away with falsely claiming Joseph remained a believer? Ditto for Nicodemus, who doesn't even make it into Luke's Gospel, despite Luke claiming to

have followed every tradition carefully. Thus, for all we know, Joseph *knew* the tomb wasn't empty, and there is no way Luke could include that detail in his record. Stuck between a damning witness and telling a lie, according to Holding's own logic, omission would be the only option left. If he was a real person, there is no other plausible reason for Joseph to have evaporated from Christian history. For even if he never converted, his role in proving or refuting the empty tomb would be a vital element of early Church history. Therefore, Holding's own logic leaves us with the conclusion that, if this Joseph existed at all, he probably knew there *was no evidence* that Jesus rose.[236]

Ultimately, since Paul was only convinced by actually "seeing" God himself, it's probable that this is all that convinced the original Christians, too (it is, after all, apart from scripture, the only evidence Paul says convinced anyone, as in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). After that, it was solely a question of trust. Because there was no way to 'check' Paul's or anyone else's claim to have seen God. All you had was his word. You either accepted it like Agrippa, or rejected it like Festus, depending on your presuppositions about visions from God or your assessment of the sincerity of the witness. Because when it came to visions, ancient peoples —even those with excellent educations and every resource imaginable, even judges sitting at trial—didn't seem to bother with checking facts the way Holding has in mind. As even Acts tells it, neither Agrippa nor Festus even thought to interrogate Paul or other witnesses about his vision. In just the same way, when Pliny the Younger heard that Curtius Rufus had seen a vision of a goddess, he asked only whether it was a hallucination or a real encounter with the divine. The possibility that the story was made up never even enters his mind, nor does he engage any effort at all to check. Nor, apparently, did the historian Tacitus, who reports the same story. On another occasion, one of Pliny the Younger's freedmen, and then one of his slaves, was "attacked" by ghosts who cut their hair as they slept, which Pliny took as an omen—it never occurred to him, apparently, to interrogate his staff to locate what was obviously a bedtime prankster.[237] If Pliny could be this gullible and slipshod in his investigations when it came to "apparitions," so could anyone lower down the social and educational ladder. If Pliny, one of the highest ranking and most educated men of his time, simply trusted such witnesses, then so would Christian converts.

Second Example: Luke on Agrippa's Cause of Death

"The point is," Holding argues, "the presence of those of greater social standing and notice, and the claims attached to them" in Acts and the Gospels, because "it is impossible that Christianity thrived and survived without having its ducks in a row in this regard." We have already seen what's wrong with this argument. It simply doesn't hold water. Nor is it even relevant to whether Jesus rose from the dead—since none of these "ducks" have anything to do with that. Everything I've said so far can now be summarized by examining Holding's second 'star' example: the claim that Herod Agrippa "was eaten by worms" as Luke reports (in Acts 12:20-23). Holding claims that "copies of Acts circulated in the area and were accessible to the public" so "had Luke reported falsely, Christianity would have been dismissed as a fraud and would not have 'caught on' as a religion." Even if that were true, it's irrelevant—getting such a detail right in no way entails or even implies getting right the details of Christ's resurrection, since the evidence is categorically different in each case: public records vs. private oral tradition, and incidental color vs. doctrinally crucial detail. But Holding's claim isn't true anyway.

First, how Herod Agrippa the Elder died was not so open to investigation. Apart from all the general difficulties noted earlier, there were no death certificates, and most people had no access to anyone who might know the truth (a common Christian does not just walk up to a Jewish king and ask whether his dad died of worms). In fact, it's likely no one knew: there was no coroner, and no such thing as an autopsy (by the Roman period, autopsies *as such* were in fact illegal—since they desecrated the body—which is why Galen had to use apes to study human anatomy, a fact I'll discuss in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*). Josephus merely reports that Agrippa died of stomach pains, and we know Josephus employed royal memoirs and records.[238] That the cause of death was "worms" would be a plausible inference, which no one could prove or refute, not even Agrippa's son. Of course, death by "worms" was curiously

so common for tyrants (including Antiochus IV, Sulla, Herod, Agrippa I, and Galerius) that historians are rightly skeptical of its historicity.[239] But even if the real cause of death had somehow been 'confirmed', the only way Luke could know of it is by rumor or consulting published histories, neither being the kind of source that would lend any credence to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. So this whole issue is a red herring.

Second, "copies of Acts" did not "circulate" until long after the elder Agrippa had died, after the Jewish War had completely destroyed the region, and most relevant witnesses were dead or sold off into slavery. Thus, it would have been exceedingly difficult for anyone to 'check' this claim, and there is no evidence anyone ever did. In fact, most expert commentators agree: regardless of when Acts was *written*, it was not *circulated* to any notable degree until the mid-second century, and therefore would not have come to anyone's attention who would have cause to dispute the claim—much less Agrippa's son (who probably died before 93 A.D., and thus probably before Acts was even *written*).[240] F.F. Bruce finds that only "its circulation in the churches from the second half of the second century onward is amply attested."[241] W.A. Strange similarly concludes that Acts "remained in obscurity until published relatively late in the second century" since "the evidence suggests that Acts only emerged into public use after the mid-[2nd]-century" as "before that point there appears to have been no published and widely known version of Acts."[242] Ben Witherington even speculates "that the manuscript had to be kept secret for a considerable period of time."[243] I personally believe Acts wasn't even written until the early 2nd century, and as noted earlier, leading scholars agree.

Thus, when Holding argues that "Luke probably would have been jailed and/or executed by Agrippa's son, Herod Agrippa II" if Luke had lied about his father's cause of death, Holding must presume Luke made this claim in his son's presence or in any public manner likely to come to his attention in his lifetime, yet we have no evidence Luke did. Indeed, Holding's point here rests on a veritable mountain of blind speculations. For example, I am unaware of any evidence of anyone ever being executed for misreporting a cause of death (it's unclear how one would even prove such a claim false, since there would be no relevant evidence remaining). It's already a huge stretch to suppose Agrippa would be so incensed at such a trivial claim as to trump up some charge (of treason? slander?) to

justify an execution, even supposing he ever heard the claim—which entails the improbable assumption that he was busy reading every book anyone ever wrote in his lifetime, or that he had a team of lackeys doing this, eager to report trivial errors concerning the record of his father. And to make matters worse, Acts went unsigned. So how would Agrippa even know whom to accuse? So not only does Holding get the facts of the matter wrong, but his entire argument is a non sequitur.

Christianity had already "caught on" as a religion long before Acts was even written, as Acts itself attests. The success of Christianity could not have been impaired by dishonesty in a book it had never relied on to sell the faith, which would not come to the attention even of most Christians until a century after the origin of the Church. So by the time any Christians used Acts in such a way, we are well into the second century, so far away from the events being reported that checking them would have been impossible. Nor would having a bogus book be a liability—for bogus Gospels and Acts sprouted like grass in that century, yet did nothing to arrest its success. If someone found a book in error on any detail, a Christian could simply disclaim the book and appeal to his own witness of the Holy Spirit, or argue the claim in question was merely symbolic or allegorical, or simply point out the obvious: that making a few mistakes as to the details does not discredit an entire story, much less a story whose truth has nothing whatever to do with those details. But this is moot anyway. As far as we can see (and as I'll show later), the actual evidence Christians used to win converts in the first century *never* included their own books, much less 'historical' texts like Luke-Acts.

Hence it bears repeating, whether Agrippa died of worms has nothing to do with the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. For instance, Paul's personal and direct testimony to having seen God himself would not have been undermined one bit by some *other* Christian getting caught lying about Agrippa dying of worms. This point carries for every other element of Luke-Acts, the only book in the New Testament that claims to be a history and that actually follows the markers of that genre (as explained earlier). The success of Christianity would not have been hindered at all by trivial lies there. At the very worst, if the book were exposed as 'full of lies', Christians simply would have abandoned it—as they did countless other bogus Acts. On the other hand, it would be a rhetorical advantage to fill a book about private, unconfirmable experiences, with public facts that were

demonstrably true. Indeed, the very fact that Hol-ding himself is impressed and persuaded by this, even though it has no bearing at all on the truth of the resurrection itself, proves the point: it would be easier to sell a private resurrection claim by packaging it with a hundred public truths that actually had nothing to do with it. And as we just saw above, when the issue came to trial, Paul didn't even try to present any evidence, much less public evidence, or claim any of the resurrection details as related by Luke in his Gospel. Apart from scripture, Paul appeals solely to private revelations from God (in both Acts and Galatians), which *no one* could confirm or refute—and, accordingly, no one did.

In the end, all these observations completely undermine the force of Holding's argument. He says "Christianity was highly vulnerable to inspection and disproof on innumerable points—any one of which, had it failed to prove out, would have snowballed into further doubt." Perhaps this would happen if anyone actually bothered to look for and actually succeeded in finding definitive proof that any such claim was false, *and* fellow Christians did not then disavow the book, or convince them the passage was meant to be allegory or symbolic or that such trivial errors did not matter to the central claim of the Gospel. But already that's a whole slew of suppositions, for which we have no evidence. And even if we grant those assumptions, this would only explain why most people rejected Christianity, as in fact most people did. It would not prove that the few who converted did so because they checked all the facts and found them sterling. Indeed, every one of these checkable facts *could well have been sterling*—that tells us nothing about whether the private, uncheckable evidence for the resurrection was sterling, too.

Public Miracles & the Problem of Finding Witnesses

Beyond historical trivia in Acts, Holding extends his argument by referring to a few public "miracles" reported in the Gospels, in particular: "an earthquake, a darkness at midday, the temple curtain torn in two" and "healings of illnesses and dysfunctions, even reversals of death, in highly public places." I'll set aside "healings" and "reversals of death" since many pagans claimed similar phenomena (as noted in Chapter 3), and there are many possible natural causes for them anyway (as I've discussed earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 6, and will again in Chapter 13). So even if these accounts are true, they do not prove Christianity true. The sole exception on record is perhaps the "healing" of a severed ear, which could not have been psychosomatic, so I'll add that to Holding's list. I'm also leaving out the rest of Holding's trivia, such as whether Jesus was executed or buried by Joseph, or received a public reception at Jerusalem, since all of that could be true even if the resurrection wasn't.

Of Holding's main examples, only two can truly be called "public": the earthquake and the noonday darkness, which somehow only Christians ever noticed—indeed, some of *them* even missed it. The Gospel of John mentions neither, nor does either Mark *or* Luke mention any earthquake. Matthew is alone in making this claim: he even claims there were *two* earthquakes a day apart.[244] So even early Christian sources don't agree there were such events. And even if we trusted these accounts (and we have no good reason to), neither event is supernatural. Yes, a solar eclipse on Passover, much less of three-hour duration, would be supernatural. However, only Luke uses the technical term for "eclipse" (Luke 23:44-45), which might only be an inference—for there is no way Luke could confirm it was an actual "eclipse of the sun" rather than something else. And the other Gospels, including the earliest, only say "darkness" (Mark 15:33 & Matthew 27:45), which could have been produced by inclement weather (though it was more likely a symbolic invention and not derived from any real event anyway).[245] Likewise, the fact that Matthew says there were *two*

earthquakes lends support to a theory of natural cause (since aftershocks are common, though again they were probably just symbolic inventions). Third, neither an earthquake nor an extended darkness proves the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. So these facts are essentially irrelevant to the truth of Christianity even if we could prove they happened—and we can't.

But set all that aside. How would someone at the end of the first century (and even by that time we can't show the Gospels were at all widely known, even by Christians themselves) check the claim that there were earthquakes in Jerusalem in some unidentified year more than two generations ago? The Jewish War would have eliminated most if not all witnesses, and those who survived would be unlikely to have lived long enough to be available, *even supposing someone could find them to ask* (or even bothered to try, and we have no evidence anyone did). Merely "failing" to find the earthquakes mentioned in other sources would not "prove" Matthew a liar. And even then, Matthew never claims to be writing history anyway—so a missionary could declare the earthquake merely symbolic, and thus avoid the whole issue.

The same problems and response were available for the noonday darkness. By the time the Gospels came to be circulated (we first hear about them in the early second century), the ability to 'check' even these highly public claims was hardly available. Its mere absence from other sources would not "prove" it false. And, of course, as far as we know, everyone who engaged any exhaustive effort to research these claims may have found them false and rejected Christianity—and only those who *didn't* check, believed. Holding cannot assume otherwise, nor can he prove otherwise. All the same could be said of Matthew's uncorroborated claim that "many" unnamed corpses of holy men rose and appeared to "many" unnamed witnesses (also an event mentioned in no other Gospel).[246] That has nothing to do with whether *Jesus* rose and appeared to anyone. And it would be impossible to check Matthew's claim anyway. The reader isn't told whom to ask—so he couldn't even find them, much less interrogate *everyone* who was in Jerusalem at the time. This is especially true given that most of them would already be dead or would have been visiting from unknown cities and nations. It isn't even clear which Passover this was.

It's important to emphasize the enormous gaps of time involved here. In the ancient world, the average life expectancy (for anyone who survived to

age 15) was 46 years, while fewer than 1 in 20 would live to 70, and fewer than 1 in 200 would live to 85. Any witness who survived the war (of 66-70 A.D.) and was at least fifteen years old in 35 A.D. (and thus could recall events of previous years with any kind of reliability), would probably be dead before 75 A.D. They would have only a 34% chance of such survival (i.e. reaching the age of at least 55) even *without* an intervening war, and persecutions by Jews and Romans as well. They would almost certainly be dead by 100 A.D., having only a 1.5% chance of such an extended survival (to the age of at least 80), and that's again without an intervening war and persecutions which would have reduced the probability of survival a great deal more.[247] As even Josephus said, just 20 years was usually enough time for witnesses to no longer be available to rebut a story.[248] It would only be far worse after 40 years, much less 60. In antiquity, that was an extraordinary span of time.

Even today, try finding an eyewitness (not a newspaper article, but an actual living witness) who could confirm that something *didn't* happen in some far away place in 1948. For example, in that year an infamous hoaxer fabricated the existence of the Selhurst School in Sussex, attended by 175 non-existent boys, through numerous bogus letters 'written by' its apocryphal headmaster H. Rochester Sneath. The hoax was eventually exposed by a newspaper reporter.[249] But what if there were no newspaper reporters, nor any relevant public records you could access? How would you 'check' that claim today? How would you 'discover' the school really didn't exist? Without telephones or the internet, such a task would require a Herculean effort of investigation requiring a vast outlay of time and expense, even if it could be done. And yet the average life expectancy now is some 70 or 80 years, when in antiquity it was less than 50. The availability of witnesses today at *ancient* rates of survival would be very small—and finding those few would not be easy. In a large city there might be a few dozen inhabitants of sufficient age (out of many tens of thousands), difficult enough to find, but Jerusalem had been depopulated, and the surrounding regions ravaged by war, and the Christian community at Rome murdered by Nero. Not surprisingly, we have *nothing* written by Palestinian witnesses of that period in the last quarter of the 1st century, and can't prove anyone was still alive then.

Consider, instead, the semipublic miracle of Jesus restoring the severed ear of an unnamed slave of the Jewish High Priest in the early 30's

A.D. First, “healed” (*iaomai*) is ambiguous enough that it could have meant simply ‘stopped the bleeding and pain’ (which the human body often does naturally), in which case there is nothing supernatural here—and such an interpretation would be an easy escape for Luke’s defenders if the claim were challenged. But Luke probably had something magical in mind. Yet he is alone in recording this (Luke 22:51). It’s not mentioned in any other account (Matthew 26:51), including the earliest version of the story (Mark 14:47) and the most detailed version of the story (John 18:10), even though *all* accounts mention the ear being severed, and John even claims to know the name of the slave whose ear was lost. So by modern standards, the claim that Jesus healed the ear is probably apocryphal. And yet proving that would be nigh impossible—how would you find anyone who was there, and how likely is it they’d even be alive? Of course, this is again irrelevant. That Jesus could heal severed ears still would not prove he rose from the dead.

Conversely, if we regard Luke as the most thorough and diligent in researching the facts—indeed, he’s the only author even claiming anything like this—then we must conclude there was probably no earthquake or hoard of zombies. For this means Luke either found no such claims (despite his thorough research) or he excluded them from his narrative because he found them false. Either way, their absence from Luke’s account entails they probably didn’t happen. And then, for the darkness and torn curtain, we already *know* Luke’s source: the Gospel of Mark. Yet Mark was probably writing a symbolic allegory, not history—or at the very least, we cannot establish otherwise. That eliminates all of Holding’s public miracles. Even the healed ear would be a perfect example of how ancient historians used probability as a criterion: since Luke could believe the greatest and most compassionate healer would not leave a severed ear untreated, he could believe Mark must have been remiss in excluding the fact that Jesus healed it. Therefore, Luke could believe that healing the ear was probably what happened, and so he would feel justified in including it in the narrative. That sort of judgment, blurring the line between inference and sourced fact, was a widely accepted practice in ancient historiography.

But again consider means. How would someone at the end of the first century check Luke’s claim? The High Priest in question was long dead, and Luke doesn’t tell the reader the name of the slave, or who among those present checked to confirm the ear was actually severed, much less

actually restored. So whom would you ask? What would they tell you? And how would you find that person, fifty or sixty years (and a whole war and persecution) after the fact? And who would go through all that effort? There is no record of anyone even trying, much less succeeding at it. As far as we know, Luke felt far enough from the events to get away with embellishing Mark's unmiraculous story, knowing it would be very unlikely his fib would be found out by then, or else Luke genuinely assumed Jesus would heal the ear. And, of course, as far as we know, everyone who *did* engage the exhaustive effort to research Luke's claim found it *false* and rejected Christianity for that very reason. Holding cannot assume otherwise, nor can he prove otherwise.

That leaves only one more miracle on Holding's list: the torn veil.[250] That is, again, of no relevance to whether Jesus rose. It was also highly symbolic, so a Christian need not have regarded it as history. But even if one did, it would be impossible to check. Only the High Priest and another priest sitting the Office of the Veil attended that veil at any given time, which was replaced due to wear at least twice a year.[251] Therefore, there could only have been at most two witnesses to the veil suddenly tearing in two at Passover, both of whom would have been long dead by the time the claim was circulated. Of course, *had it actually happened*, we might expect the whole priesthood to hear about it, and thence the rumor might spread and be passed down to subsequent generations. But a Christian could just as easily expect the two witnesses to cover it up, just as Matthew claims the Jews tried to cover up the resurrection of Jesus—which means even if a Christian found a living witness, he could dismiss their denial of this miracle as coming from yet another lying Jew. Either way, if it *didn't* happen, by the time the claim was circulated, there would be no way at all to prove it hadn't.

All of Holding's appeals to the availability of witnesses ignore the relevant facts above. He claims "there were also built-in 'fact checkers' stationed around the Empire who could say something about all the claims central to Jerusalem and Judaea—the Diaspora Jews." But due to age and war, by the time the Gospel claims were circulated at all widely, few if any living Jews would have been in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Obviously, had those public "miracles" actually happened, later generations might have heard of them as the tales were passed down (though even then it would be a chore to find someone who had such a connection—not

everyone is a comprehensive library of oral lore). But if the claims were made up—and that is, after all, the only hypothesis in question—how would they be 'refuted'? An aspiring Christian could ask a hundred Diaspora Jews in a dozen different cities, but all these Jews could tell them is that they had not heard any such stories—and that would not prove such things didn't happen. That's a far cry from having "built-in fact checkers."

Another example is Holding's strangely contradictory argument that these public "miracles" took place before "attendant crowds numbering in the millions" and yet this is counted as taking place "in a small city and culture where word would spread fast." Since when do "crowds numbering in the millions" count as a "small" community? Indeed, doesn't rumor and misinformation travel just as fast? Holding apparently didn't think about the logistics of this situation. First, such huge numbers actually make investigating a rumor all but impossible, since finding witnesses would be like finding a needle in a haystack—all the more so since most would be gone after the festival, to destinations unknown. Second, the same fact would make *stopping* a rumor all but impossible—such enormous crowds would be beyond anyone's control, and the rapid spread throughout them of any tale would far outrun any individual who might want to deny it. And then, only days later, the rumor would be carried off to countless foreign cities. No one could clean up such a mess. Finally, how could "millions" witness a localized event anyway? This would be impossible even in a theater designed to allow large numbers of people to see the same stage or arena. The largest such venues in antiquity never exceeded more than 80,000 spectators—and even then, how well would they all be able to see any particular event? Not well enough to be sure of any miraculous details.

And that's precisely the problem: at most a few hundred could have been witness to any specific event, and very few of them would be capable of any reliable observation. But how do you locate a few, much less a few hundred, unnamed people in an itinerant crowd of *millions* who attended an event in some unspecified year fifty or sixty ago? Only earthquakes and a global darkness would be observed by all, and we've already examined the problems there. But there is something odd about that, too: if God had no trouble covering all Judaea (or indeed the whole world) with a miraculous darkness (and Holding must assume it was miraculous, or else it has no relevance to Christianity being true), how could God have had

any scruple against having the risen Jesus appear to all Judaea (or indeed the whole world)? Isn't it *peculiar* that the only event that makes Christianity true was private and available only to a privileged few, while the only events that were at all public had little to do with Christianity being true, and even then were only 'reported' generations later, *only* by Christians, and after a devastating war (not to mention the Neronian persecution) had eliminated just about any chance of checking the facts? Doesn't that look more like a human than a divine hand at work in history? Since it's relevant to Holding's opening quotation and prize example, we must note in the end that Paul includes *none* of the miracles examined above as among "those things" he says Agrippa knows about. They never come up. Paul doesn't even include the empty tomb in his defense, either. Though this was not miraculous in and of itself, certainly the Christians would have benefited from having a prominent witness to corroborate it. Yet no one is ever said to have observed the tomb empty except a handful of Christians and liars (Matthew 28:11-15). Indeed, it's most remarkable that the Christians associate the burial with a "famous" man (well, at least a prominent man), yet that same man is conveniently not around to confirm the tomb was empty. The Christians thus avoid linking even Joseph of Arimathea to any evidence of the resurrection, since he never turns up in Acts as a witness for or against the Christian claim. So even that 'fact' remained thoroughly private, and (once the story began to circulate with the Gospels) far beyond anyone's ability to 'check'.

Summary

Holding claims that "you start a religion by linking to obscure *and* nameless people," but it's unclear to me why anyone would have to do that. Is Holding presuming the only alternative is that the Christians made *everything* up? Why? The only claim at issue is whether Jesus rose from the dead, since that's the only claim that really distinguished Christianity from every other sect of the Jews. Even supposing the Christians fabricated everything (and I see no need to suppose that—we can reject the resurrection claim without rejecting every other claim they made), why would they make up a bunch of momentous events in a small, unknown, unnamed hovel, featuring unknown, unnamed yokels? Wouldn't a prestigious location and cast of characters be more momentous, more awesome, more persuasive?

All Holding has to say against this is that it would have been more risky. But that's true only if the 'famous' details had anything to do with proving Jesus rose from the dead—yet none did. And even granting Holding's 'domino' theory, the only 'risk' then would be preventing the recruitment of wealthy, highly-skilled scholars or legal magistrates who had the time and desire to check the facts in meticulous detail—yet there is no evidence any such people *were* recruited in that first century. Even Sergius the proconsul was converted (according to Acts) without any investigation of the facts of Christ's resurrection (a unique case I'll discuss Chapter 13). We also have no evidence that anyone who converted in that period did so after checking even a single historical claim made in Luke-Acts—much less *all* of them. We don't even have any clear evidence they *could*. Moreover, even if a document or claim was refuted, Christians could simply have resorted to the excuse that it was really allegory or not representative of what "honest" Christians say. So where's the risk? The Christians didn't have to make up any of these 'famous' details, because none related to their claim that Jesus rose from the dead; and even had they made them up, there's no evidence any actual converts ever checked to find out, or even *could* have. Maybe those who rejected Christianity could have—but that lends no comfort to Holding's thesis.

And that's the bottom line: we can deny the resurrection without denying all these claims about famous people, since no events connected to such people have any bearing on whether the *resurrection* was true. Not even the darkness, earthquake, or miraculous curtain-ripping. Even if you believe those things happened—based on the unsupported assumption that (a) many converts could and did check, and then (b) they actually confirmed these events, and (c) they did so on evidence we ourselves would consider sufficiently reliable—none of these events even *implies* Jesus rose from the dead. So including famous people and events in the story was perfectly safe. The resurrection remained a private claim impossible for anyone to confirm or refute, no matter how capable or diligent. Even those remarkable few who could have attempted (a), (b), and (c) enough times to grow weary of Christian lies would simply join the ranks of the vast majority who rejected Christianity. And we're only interested in those who converted.

Of course, the first Christians could be offered as an exception, since they would have access to evidence no one else would have, but it's notoriously difficult to identify with confidence what the first Christians *really* believed, or why, since we only have the testimony of *later* Christians. Even Paul, close as he is to the first witnesses, does little to confirm any of the most contested claims of the later Gospels, such as the empty tomb, or that Christ rose in a body of flesh, or that Christ was seen flying up into heaven—or the darkness, earthquakes, rent veil, healed ear, and so on. And even with regard to the 'ancillary' claims—associating the story of early Christianity with so many 'famous' people—we have no evidence any of those claims were circulating before the Jewish War (after which, checking such facts would have been all but impossible, or moot). Nor is there any reason to assume Christians needed to make any of these claims up—being ancillary, such claims could tell the straight truth, since they had nothing whatever to do with whether their essential claim was true (that Jesus rose from the dead); and being public, even a mediocre scholar could get such facts right, and still not get anywhere near the real truth behind the private and uncheckable evidence of the resurrection. Therefore, even if the Christians "had their ducks in a row" regarding all these famous connections, since none of those famous connections bore any relevance to the resurrection of Jesus, such a row of ducks would offer no real support to that claim. So even if potential converts could check

these facts, that doesn't even imply they could 'confirm', to any reliable standard, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Never mind that we have no clear evidence anyone *did*, or even cared to (two points I'll examine in Chapters 13 and 17, respectively).

Conclusion

Holding presents no evidence that any Christian *convert* did any fact-checking before converting, or even would have done so. And for many of his own examples, Holding has not even made an adequate case that they *could* have. That there *were* people in antiquity who could and would is moot, since we have no evidence any such people converted. Holding also presents no evidence that any 'checkable' claims involving famous people and events were employed to win converts before the end of the first century (rather than purely private claims that could only be trusted on someone's word). Nor does Holding present any evidence that the Gospels (much less Acts) were widely known at all, even by Christians, before the second century, a contingency his argument requires. Holding also presents no evidence that Luke and other authors didn't add false, exaggerated, or unconfirmed hearsay to texts that otherwise contained well-researched public facts. Yet *all* the actual evidence of the resurrection consists of unconfirmable hearsay alone. So even if every public, checkable claim in the New Testament were entirely true, even then it could not be concluded that the private, uncheckable claims were true as well. Therefore, we cannot conclude from any of this that evidence of Christ's resurrection was "irrefutable."

8. Who Would Want to be Persecuted?

The Social Foundations of Martyrdom

James Holding rightly downplays the issue of martyrdom, since legend and fiction abound in that arena. The actual evidence from the first century does not support the conclusion that martyrs needed, much less had, what we would consider reliable evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. Indeed, most martyr tales are not only bogus, but from later periods, and even counting those that are early enough to matter and have any claim to credibility, we still have no reliable evidence of any eyewitness actually dying for refusing to recant his belief in the resurrection of the corpse of Jesus. Contemporary scholarship agrees: in the first century the persecution of Christians was much smaller in frequency and scale, and very different in nature, from that of later centuries. Moreover, the Church itself, as well as the social, political, and economic circumstances of the Empire as a whole, were all notably different in later periods.

As David DeSilva remarks, "rarely in the first century were Christians killed" and "far more rarely were they executed on official orders."[252] Acts claims there was no formal Roman opposition to Christianity in any legal sense until after 62 A.D. at the earliest. Even after that it was not as strong as it would become in subsequent generations. The only known Roman actions against Christians in the 1st century were the extralegal acts of emperors whom even the Romans themselves declared as formally damned—the decisions of Nero and Domitian *literally* lost all legal force.[253] Later, around 110 A.D., the Emperor Trajan instructed Pliny the Younger that declaring political allegiance to Christ over the Emperor was effectively a crime (treason, no doubt, though the Christians had also violated a local law against illegal assembly). Yet he says there was no specific law against *Christianity*, and Christians were not to be hunted down. Pliny himself reveals that he knew of no laws against Christians and had never had to deal with the problem before, so his response had to be improvised.[254]

Holding claims to find evidence that *Paul* executed Christians in Philippians 3:6, by reading that passage in light of discussions of

persecution in the Maccabean texts. But he's wrong. In that Philippians passage, Paul gives a list of his qualifications in parallel structure, such that the context does not fit that of Maccabees, which *never* uses either relevant word in the way Holding implies anyway. *Diôkô* is used eleven times in 1 and 2 Maccabees, always in the sense of "chase," and not in any context relating to persecution, and *zêlos* appears only four times, also none in any context relating to persecution.[255] As for Paul, he says only that "with regard to zeal" he "pursued" the Church before his conversion, just as "with regard to the law" he was a Pharisee, and "with regard to obedience" to the law he was "blameless."

The word for "pursue" here is ambiguous, with positive and negative meanings, from "follow" to "hunt"—though in formal terminology it means "prosecute a case."[256] Even if we assume Paul is using the term formally, he doesn't tell us what charges he brought, or what penalties he sought, or for what actual claims or deeds, or even whether he succeeded in winning any of his cases. So also for 1 Corinthians 15:9, 1 Timothy 1:13, and Galatians 1:13 and 1:23, where Paul also "besieged" or "endeavored to destroy" (*portheô*) the Church, which are just as ambiguous in their meaning, telling us neither what he actually did, or why, or whether it succeeded. Likewise, the word for "zeal" means "jealousy," though usually in a positive sense, as in "eager rivalry" or a "longing to emulate." In this case, Paul would mean emulating his fellow Pharisees, unless he is actually referring to rivaling the Jewish *ecclesia* and is not speaking of persecuting the Christian Church here at all (the context does suggest he meant to list only his positive traits). By extension, the word thus means "fervor," hence "zeal," which says nothing about whether Paul wanted or sought to kill anyone, much less that he did kill anyone.[257] Conclusion: Paul may well have been partly responsible for some executions of Christians (as Acts claims). But we cannot prove this from anything Paul said in his letters. Nor can we know if any of these hypothetical executions had anything to do with refusing to recant any evidence for the resurrection of Jesus (after all, this is never the cause of any executions in Acts).

At the same time, it may well be that the earliest Christians faced death more for their moral cause than any historical claim, which was not a novel idea. As W.H.C. Frend observes:

> In the first two centuries C.E. there was a liv-ing pagan tradition of self-sacrifice for a cause, a preparedness if necessary to defy an unjust ruler, that existed alongside the devel-oping Christian concept of martyrdom inher-ited from Judaism.[258]

And Christian martyrdom particularly made sense from a cultural and sociological perspective. Many experts, including Alan Segal and others have found a common sociological underpinning of martyrdom movements throughout history, from aboriginal movements in the New World to Islamic movements in the Middle East and beyond. In every well-documented case, Segal observes, a widespread inclination to martyrdom "is an oblique attack by the powerless against the power of oppressors," in effect "canceling the power of an oppressor through moral claims to higher ground and to a resolute claim to the afterlife, as the better" and only "permanent" reward. "From modern examples," Segal writes, "we can see that what produces martyrdom," as well as the corresponding "exaltation of the afterlife," is "a colonial and imperial situation, a conquering power, and a subject people whose religion does not easily account for the conquest." Some of these subjects are "predisposed to understand events in a religious context," and are suffering from some "political or economic" deprivation, or even a social or cultural deprivation (as when the most heartfelt morals of the subgroup are not recognized or realized by the dominating power structure).[259]

The Roman Empire was tailor-made to breed exactly such resentment and deprivation. This was prominent among the middle and lower classes—who were often completely disenfranchised, abused, exploited, callously ignored, and all too often denied justice or even the means to live. But it was also present among even the higher echelons of society—for under the imperial system, having wealth and status increasingly became no guarantee of real influence or control, much less of safety or justice. Democracy was gone. Even the Senate itself could hardly take the initiative against the will of emperors, a will that was all too often anything but just, wise, or compassionate. Those of the Senatorial class serving administrative posts abroad would be even more distant from the base of imperial power. Regardless of your rank, at any moment, without warning, an emperor could decide you were a threat and have you eliminated, demoted, or stripped of your dignity and property—

as happened frighteningly often, a fact Tacitus documents in deliberate detail (especially in his *Annals*). Even beyond this ever-present fear, Tacitus also documents how the emperor could interfere with a governor's control of a province in any number of ways, often through intermediaries of substantially lesser rank—which produced a regular state of intolerable insult. For example, though a proconsul was far the social superior of a procurator (who was often a freed slave, or at most a member of the equestrian class and not the higher-ranking senatorial class, much less the highest ranking consular class), to cross the will of an emperor's procurator amounted to crossing the will of the emperor himself—and since the emperor was not *there* to see what was actually happening, his procurators held a tremendous amount of power over any proconsul, and could easily abuse that power, upsetting the proper social order.

At every level of social rank, the same insult, injustice, insolence, and disenfranchisement could be found somewhere, affecting someone—even within the imperial army and administration. You basically had only two options: you could just 'take it', or you could decide not to take it any more. Those who preferred the latter option would form that segment of the population from which Christianity successfully recruited, especially in its first century. And this selection bias would have significant ramifications for the attitudes and behavior of Christians, who would inevitably differ markedly from non-Christians precisely because they already differed from their peers, in attitude and behavior, *before converting*. And indeed, they would differ in exactly that respect relating to martyrdom and suffering that Dr. Segal describes above. Christians represented those who weren't going to take it any more. The behavior of Christians, and the attractiveness of Christianity as a movement, can only be understood within this context.

Moreover, the logic of the Christian situation (as with all other comparable movements in history) is impeccable: if sinners go to hell or oblivion, and the faithful go to eternal heavenly bliss, then nothing else matters, for everything else is temporary and insignificant compared to the eternal future. The faithful will even inherit the earth itself, gaining all the power and plenty they always longed for, while watching their oppressors and exploiters suffer utter downfall and defeat. In other words, "everyone gets what they deserve." Anyone convinced of *this* will suffer *anything*. Period. They will endure any death, any torture, any discomfort, any

indignity. And all the while they will smile inside, knowing their abusers will "get it" in the end, while they themselves will get twice the reward for having carried such a burden, remaining strong in the face of every effort of those evil powers to knock them down. In human history there has never been so powerful a motivator as this—a point well-taken by the Islamic authorities who found a way to exploit this motivation *en masse* to command entire armies, and mollify oppressed and exploited populations. The very same motivation led Buddhists to set themselves on fire to protest the Vietnam War. Yet Holding cannot claim this entails there has ever been "irrefutable proof" that Islam and Buddhism were true. Indeed, as a Christian he must deny they are true at all. So evidence of a willingness to endure brutal fates and enormous hardships cannot establish the truth of any belief.

Instead, combine the eschatological ideology with the scale of deprivation endured by the subjects of Rome, and all you will get is a powder keg. Had Christianity not arisen of its own, it would have been necessary to invent it—or something like it. For such a movement was all but inevitable under the sociocultural conditions of the Roman Empire. It's human nature to long for peace, love, justice, and the control of your own life. Take all of that away from millions of people, and it's just a matter of time before rebellions break out. And there can only be two kinds of rebellion within a system like that of the Empire, which lacked true democracy or even a sufficient scale of freedom of speech: the violent or the cultural. Violent revolution is always an economic contest of military resources, which Rome would always win. And Rome always did. Therefore, the only rebellion that could succeed was a cultural revolution, which meant a war of ideas—and that was a war the rebels could win, so long as they had the better ideas and employed the right tactics on the battlefield of the mind. Such a war still had casualties (martyrs) and hardships (persecution), but it was still a war, and like all well-motivated wars, soldiers didn't give up simply because of the prospect of dying or suffering. Indeed, as in any righteous war, dying and suffering is exactly what soldiers are willing to pay for victory.[260]

Clearly the sociocultural conditions of the early Christian willingness to endure persecution and martyrdom fit *exactly* those of every other comparable movement in history, matching every element of the above analysis perfectly. Yet it follows, since it holds in every other case

known to man, that their motivation was not some particular historical claim or esoteric dogma. As in every other case, their motivation was rebellion against a corrupt social order in defense of a superior vision of society. Their motive was a moral system, a view of the way society should function and structure itself. *That* was what attracted recruits to the Christian movement, *that* is what they suffered and died for—not "proof" that Jesus stepped out of a tomb. As far as motivation and attraction are concerned, that was incidental. It mattered only when it came to the particulars of dogma or theology, and as one can observe, the Christians themselves were hotly divided about the nature of the resurrection and the evidence for it.

Instead, as long as a missionary could convince someone already receptive to the Christian social message that *their* movement had the Backing of God, that was all they needed to win a convert for Jesus. Holding has never proved that "irrefutable" evidence of any sort of resurrection (much less a particular kind of resurrection) was necessary to achieve such persuasion —for there were scriptural 'proofs', ongoing 'miracles', proofs of sincerity, personal charisma, evidence of the Church's ability to meet social needs, and any number of other arguments that would have been sufficient (alone or in conjunction with each other) for quite enough people to account for the actual scale of Christianity's success in its first century (as we've seen in several chapters already, especially Chapter 6; and we'll see more direct evidence in Chapter 13).

Paul and Tertullian

We can see all this in two representative Christian sources on suffering and martyrdom: Paul and Tertullian. Paul, because he is the earliest Christian to write anything down (as far as we know); Tertullian, because he is the first Christian to articulate so well the actual psychological underpinning of Christian martyrdom. The Epistles often describe the Christian mission as a war, and missionaries as soldiers.[261] But Paul wrote of his own persecution *even by fellow Christians*:

> I know this shall end up in my salvation, through your prayers and the additional help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that in nothing shall I be put to shame, but that in all boldness, as always, now Christ, too, shall be made greater in my body, whether by life, or by death. For to me, to live is [to be with] Christ, and to die is gain. But if I'm to live in the flesh, this shall bring fruit from my work. What I will choose I don't know, for I am stuck between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ—for that is so much better—yet to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.[262]

Thus Paul *cannot* be put to shame, and doesn't fear struggle or death at all. To the contrary, he longs for it: death, to achieve his own reward in the future life; and struggle and shame, to satisfy his compassion by saving others before he goes. Longing for paradise and reward, and loving one's fellow man (with a desire to make sacrifices for the common good) are natural human attributes, not culturally specific ones. Paul struggles *for others*, not for some historical claim as to the nature of Christ's resurrection. Paul is willing to die *for the reward*, not because he thinks one ought to die simply to uphold a true proposition about a historical event. Paul's Christians believed in *some* historical event, surely, but we must ask *why* they believed, and *what* they believed, and the answer to both questions does not support Holding. They didn't believe for the

reasons he thinks, nor can we prove they believed in a resurrection of the kind he has in mind.

For an attitude like Paul's, which was no doubt typical of early Christians, and admirable even to many pagans, all that was necessary was the belief that preaching Christ would procure a heavenly reward, for him and others. And yet as far as we can tell, very little was needed for Paul to be convinced of that. In his letters, he only mentions three kinds of evidence that persuaded him or anyone else: a private "revelation" (which even Acts describes as an amorphous vision), the unlocking of secrets in scripture, and the working of miracles within the Church community.[263] 1 Peter 1 establishes the same reasoning, that Christians should endure persecution for future reward simply because scripture says so. Therefore, it cannot be maintained that Paul or any first-century Christians had any *other* evidence, or even needed it. They might have had more evidence than Paul mentions, but the evidence *we* have is insufficient to prove this. As far as we can *prove*, visions, scripture, and so-called 'miracle-working' were sufficient for every actual convert to the faith in the first century. Hence their willingness to suffer and die tells us nothing about any *other* evidence, and therefore cannot establish that there was anything like "irrefutable" evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, much less that he did so in any particular sense.

Paul also wrote:

> For if I should want to shout aloud, I will not be a fool. For I will tell the truth. But I fear someone might hold me in greater esteem than what he sees of me or hears from me. And because of the great magnitude of my revelations, so I would not be esteemed too greatly, God gave me a thorn in my flesh, an Angel of Satan, so he might slap me, that I would not be esteemed too greatly. Three times I called upon the Lord about this, that it would go away. But he said to me, "My grace is enough for you. For power is fulfilled in weakness." And so I most gladly shout aloud all the more in my weaknesses, so the power of Christ will rest upon me. Therefore I delight in my weaknesses, in injuries, in frus-trations, in persecutions and difficulties, for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am powerful.[264]

Paul never says he endures all this hardship because the tomb was empty or Thomas put his fingers in Christ's wounds or any such thing. He endures it because God told Paul *directly*, by revelation, that it was worth it. Period. Paul does not say he isn't worried because he has a ton of evidence, enough to be sure he's right. He doesn't need a ton of evidence. All he needs is a direct revelation from God—and all fellow Christians need is Paul's assurance of that fact, which Paul proves by his own behavior: his willingness to endure all these things! In fact, it's precisely that willingness that demonstrates Paul's power—the strength of his conviction—thus proving he deserves God's reward, and persuading others to find God's salvation.

This motivation—the achievement of salvation and favor from God—was the very thing that made the hardships of conversion an actual blessing rather than a liability. All this suffering was *worth it*, and could even make the destined blessings of God all the *greater*, just as a crippled veteran might revel in his medals and honors. And the only proof that prospective Christians apparently needed here was evidence of a missionary's conviction, which in turn rested primarily on private revelations from God (as far as we can tell from the letters of Paul), not "evidence" in a modern sense, and certainly not "irrefutable" evidence. Visions and revelations from the gods were a common cultural phenomenon among pagans and Jews of the day, and thus not peculiar to Christianity. They also have known biological causes and therefore do not entail supernatural origin.[265]

The early debate between the Christian scholar Origen and the skeptic Celsus reveals how people thought at the time: reasonable people seeing apparitions while awake was enough to "prove" those apparitions real, a line of reasoning we now know to be fatally flawed.[266] Of course, for most people even back then this was not enough—which is why most people didn't convert. Rather, Christianity won over those for whom this *was* enough—because they had nothing better, and knew no better, and were fed up with their state of desperation and deprivation, and thus were ready for any hope.

A century and a half later, in chapter 50 of his *Apology*, Tertullian would summarize the whole case, drawing the very analogy that social historians have found in every other suffering movement:

> It’s quite true that it is our desire to suffer, but it is in the way that the soldier longs for war. No one indeed suffers willingly, since suffer-ing necessarily implies fear and danger. Yet the man who objected to the conflict, both fights with all his strength, and when victor-ious, rejoices in the battle, because he reaps from it glory and spoil.

Exactly. To understand converts to Christianity in the 1st century, one need only understand the soldiers who volunteered for every just war in human history. The psychology is the same. The motivation the same. Tertullian also lists numerous examples of pagans engaging in self-sacrifice and enduring hardship and torture, admiring those who do, or exhorting others to do so. He represents self-sacrifice as the admirable height of moral wisdom, thus proving this was a cultural ideal quite widespread at the time. Tertullian continues:

> Go zealously on, good rulers, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust. Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent ... Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you. It is rather a temptation to us. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow. The blood of Christians is seed. Many of your writers exhort to the courageous bearing of pain and death ... And who that contemplates it, is not excited to inquire what is at the bottom of it? Who, after inquiry, does not embrace our doctrines? And when he has embraced them, who doesn’t long to suffer that he may become a partaker of the fullness of God’s grace, that he may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood? For that secures the remission of all sins.

Every element is here: the motivation is a war, of the oppressed against the oppressor, and their suffering *is* their victory. It proves the oppressed are right, courageous, and deserve every good thing. And it proves their abusers are evil, and therefore *wrong*. And the very fact that Christians were willing to die for this moral ideal was already a potent proof that their ideal was worth suffering for—and therefore it won even more converts. And those converts endured all abuse because the cause was just, and serving a just cause secured for them the eternal reward of God.

Of course, for Tertullian, the “doctrines” he spoke of were “supported” by the evidence of the Gospels. But that means he had at hand no more evidence than we do now. Yet the Gospels do not necessarily represent the beliefs of most Christians of the first century, or those of the first two generations. Nor can Holding’s argument—which pertains only to the origin and early success of Christianity—be sustained for Christians so far removed from the original evidence. By then, for example, “checking the facts” was simply not a possibility, while converts could be won over not only by exaggerated evidence, but by the very conviction of Christians themselves, as Tertullian himself observes, rather than by anything we would regard as reliable proof.

Where Holding Gets it Wrong

So when Holding points out that "the Jews would dislike you, the Romans would dislike you, your family would disown you, everyone would avoid or make sport of you," this doesn't really argue for there being "irrefutable evidence" of the resurrection of Jesus. For we've seen there were many other motives available for potential and actual converts to endure such things.

Of course, I also think Holding is overstating the case, as often he does. There is no evidence in Acts or Paul that being Christian led to "Romans" disliking you, and the evidence there is, in both Acts and Paul, demonstrates that not all Jews shared the hostility of those factions that pursued and harassed the Church. I'm also not aware of any evidence from the first century of any convert *actually* being "disowned" by his family (maybe in later centuries, but too many things had changed by then to draw any definite analogy). So that couldn't have been too common, whereas there is evidence that at least some families remained *intact* even when divided by faith, since that was a contingency Paul specifically responds to.[267] And it's certainly not true that "everyone" avoided Christians—it's not even clear that *anyone* avoided Christians in the first century. Shunning never happens in Acts and is not a problem Paul ever had to deal with in the Epistles—to the contrary, if anything, he had to resolve quite the opposite problem: excessive fraternization.[268] Paul had no apparent difficulty enjoying the company of non-Christians himself,[269] while Christians were repeatedly exhorted to treat outsiders with kindness and humility, which entails there can't have been too much shunning going on.[270] Were Christians ridiculed in the first century? Maybe by some people. So were Jews. And even some pagans—the Roman satirists made no end of sport of popular cults. Did that mean *everyone* ridiculed members of all these religions? No. And I'm not aware of any evidence supporting such hyperbole. Nor did such social conflict prevent all those *other* cults from winning converts.

Holding also claims “men like Paul and Matthew, and even Peter and John, gave up lucrative trades for the sake of a mission that was all too obviously going to be nothing but trouble for them.” *Nothing* but trouble? Anyone who reads Paul’s letters—even from the quote of Philippians above—can see that missionaries like Paul believed there were positive gains worth far more than any losses. Again, love of one’s fellow man is a natural human attribute, and every culture has those who despise wealth. So “nothing” but trouble is just more hyperbole. And did Paul and his peers really give up “lucrative” careers? There’s no evidence regarding how successful they were at their respective trades. It may well be they found an easier job they were better at, as many a preacher has done since. And there was certainly money in the Church, so much in fact that Paul had to defend himself against charges of profiteering.[271] But money was not so highly regarded by devout men anyway,[272] and all the Apostles were no doubt such devout men even before they met Jesus or encountered the Gospel. They may have despised money just like the Essenes, and sought a greater good, which became the very reason they followed Jesus or his Gospel in the first place.

Surely a man like Paul saw winning souls as a far more valuable use of his time than winning cash, so the prospect of giving up the latter for the former would present no deterrent. Conversely, most entering the Church would materially benefit from the loving, communist society it provided. And I already discussed the available motives of the few who would be giving anything up by entering (in Chapter 5). In fact, it was also possible to serve both careers: when in Corinth, we’re told Paul returned to his trade as tentmaker (Acts 18:1-3), and may have done so in other towns (Acts 20:34), as often as possible, thereby sustaining himself *and* his mission. Peter, John, and Matthew may well have kept regular jobs on the side, too (e.g. John 21), and certainly most actual Christians did. As far as we know, only those who were financially supported by the Church gave up paying jobs for missionary work.

Holding then confuses historical periods when he quotes Robin Lane Fox’s discussion of events in the 3rd and 4th centuries. That can have no bearing on the state of affairs at Christianity’s origin, or its development in its first hundred years. When Holding cites Fox for the claim that “Christians could expect social ostracization if they stuck by their faith,” including “rejection by family and society” and “relegation to outcast

status," Holding neglects to mention that Fox does not in fact demonstrate this, but only the existence of social tension between pagans and Christians within the same community, or even the same family, and only in some cases, *in later centuries*. Thus, Holding's quotation is three times off the mark, not only referring to the wrong period, but far overstating what his source actually claims. The evidence does not support any kind of culture-wide "shaming" of Christians—for not everyone was their enemy, and their values were *not* as contrary to the higher ideals of most Greeks, Romans, or Jews as Holding implies. Many among all three groups did not like the inequities produced by the values of the dominant elite. Even where Christians differed from their peers among the lower and middle classes, those differences were not the sort to cause resentment or disgust, but more likely admiration or, at worst, indifference. Indeed, the values of Christians were very close to the moral ideals of Greco-Roman philosophers, legendary sages, and revered Rabbis (for examples see Chapters 5 and 2).

In like fashion, none of the passages Holding cites from the New Testament support the conclusion that the entire pagan society was dead-set against the Christians. All of his verses refer only to specific occasions of persecution, which were not representative of the way Christians were normally treated in the first century. But those passages *do* support my argument that these persecutions were willingly born because of an expectation of future reward, and a commitment to the moral ideals of compassion and justice:

Hebrews 10:26-39 is a classic example (and might suggest a time in the Church a generation or two after the conclusion of Acts), where assurances that the evidence is "irrefutable" never come up, only assurances of the Christian apocalyptic hope, with its attendant fear of hell and longing for heaven. In fact, the letter then *immediately* goes into why this hope should be trusted *without* evidence (Hebrews 11). This is not a verse that helps Holding's case. There's nothing here about a universal pagan antipathy to Christian values, nor any reference to having strong evidence as the reason for persevering.

Philippians 1:27-30 also speaks only of specific adversaries, not the whole society in which Christians lived, and says nothing of Christians being hated for their values. And Paul declares there that those who persecute them will go down to destruction while they, by persevering, will be saved, another example of the *real* motivation behind Christians enduring every attack.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 only says the Thessalonians suffered some great oppression that made them a model for other congregations to follow. It doesn't say what that oppression was, or from whom it came, or why. And since it refers to all this in the past tense, Paul cannot have meant a persistent cultural problem. In fact, when he elaborates (in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16), it's clear Paul means the Thessalonians were persecuted in a past incident by their own neighbors in a manner similar to the way certain factions of the Jews persecuted the Church in Judea. According to Acts, these persecutions were not actions representative of the general population, but of a minority faction of adversaries. Moreover, Paul's analogy entails they were persecuted for theological doctrines, not their moral values. Similarly, **2 Thessalonians 1:4-5** doesn't say what persecutions or oppression, from whom, or what for. But it does give the usual reason for enduring: the righteous gain heaven, their oppressors gain destruction (2 Thess. 1:5-11). The reason given is never the strength of any evidence.

1 Peter 2:11-18 (which also might come from the later part of the 1st century) actually says the *opposite* of what Holding claims. It says Christians should win the praise of outsiders by their good behavior, thus refuting by their actions the *false* charges against them, and this entails fulfilling (not defying) the values of the wider culture (including obeying the government and the entire social order outside the Church). Hence 1 Peter 3:16 completes the thought begun at 3:13, which is exactly the opposite of what Holding leads us to believe: "Who will harm you if you are zealous for what is good?" Only then does the letter go on to talk about those who are persecuted *anyway*, so already the letter is denying this was the norm. That's the context of the verse that exhorts Christians to be good

“so when those people who blab disparage your good manner of life in Christ, they will be ashamed.” Does that sound like Christian values were at odds with popular values? To the contrary, the fact that the author expected this disparagement to be unusual, and the fact that he expected persecutors would be ashamed to resort to it, both imply that Christians were living by values widely respected in Greco-Roman (and Jewish) society. And this is explicit in Titus 2:7-3:8, where Christians are specifically exhorted to *follow* popular values so outsiders will think well of them. In fact, quite contrary to Holding’s claim, Christians were *always* told to uphold the higher values and social institutions of the wider society.[273] Likewise, **1 Peter 4:12-16** says if Christians are to be persecuted, let it be for the name of Christ only, not for any evil deed (or even for specifically claiming Jesus rose from the dead). And, again, the motivation is immediately given as the fate of heaven and hell, not the strength of any evidence (1 Pet. 4:17-19). So none of this supports Holding’s point.

I needn’t bother with Holding’s citation of Revelation, because that entire tract is a prophetic vision. But even in the section Holding cites (the mention of tribulations in Smyrna and Pergamum in Revelation 2), only *very specific* persecution events are mentioned, not a general state of cultural opposition—just one synagogue of “false Jews” in Smyrna, and the execution of one man, Antipas, in Pergamum.[274]

One continual theme in all these passages is that those who suffer ought to suffer because Christ did, and Christ is the best of men, the ideal all should emulate.[275] Yet we know from the Gospel stories (and the predicted fate of the Messiah in scripture, as I examined in Chapter 1) that Jesus was not persecuted because his values were unpopular, but for precisely the opposite reason: they were immensely popular, and it’s only the wicked elite who attacked him, and in so doing are charged as *hypocrites*. Hence Jesus was not executed because his values were despised, but because the elite had rejected the popular values of justice and compassion that Jesus represented and upheld. By being called to emulate him in their persecution, the message conveyed is that Christians are being persecuted by the same sorts of hypocrites who pervert popular values (exactly as suggested in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16), not by a society cherishing

different values. And that was the point: Christians won converts because they were upholding the values that many cherished but their leaders did not—or, worse, rendered lip service to but trampled in practice.

What Hebrews *Actually* Says

Here Holding tries to pull a fast one and pretend that Hebrews 11 actually says we should base our faith on the evidence, that in fact the message of Hebrews 11 is that people had faith only when they had "undeniable proof of God's existence and power." This is *not* the message of Hebrews 11, so I can only imagine Holding is banking on his readers not actually picking up a Bible and checking for themselves. Hebrews says the heroes of the Old Testament were *not* given evidence sufficient to prove what they hoped for or were promised, but they "trusted" in God anyway, and were rewarded for this faith by getting what they expected. The point is not whether they had sufficient evidence to believe in God. The point is that God's word was enough for them—removing the need for any further evidence.

Read the chapter and judge for yourself: the obvious moral of the story is that Christians should simply trust that what they expect or were told would happen (either through "revelations" or interpretations of scripture, according to Galatians 1:12 and Romans 16:25-26) will actually come true, even though they do not yet have evidence it will. For Abel and Enoch, blind faith had to come first, rewards after (Hebrews 11:4-6). Noah could not yet see evidence of a coming flood, but trusted God anyway (11:7). Abraham went where he was told, despite having no idea where he was going, and no proof it would be worth it (11:8-10). Sarah had to trust in faith that she would conceive despite all evidence to the contrary (11:11-12). All of them trusted in what they could not yet see (11:13), and so they will be rewarded with eternal life *for trusting in what they could not yet see* (11:14-16). Abraham obeyed God's command to kill his own son, "trusting" without evidence that God would raise his son back from the dead to fulfill his promise (11:17-19). And so on. In every case, the example is of someone simply trusting God, without evidence confirming that what God said was true or would indeed take place (11:20-40). The point is not that these people had proof of God's power, but that they *didn't* have proof that God would use that power as they hoped. And now, the only "proof" of God's power the author of Hebrews offers is these very stories! He is using these ancient stories themselves as the only proof that

God exists, has such power, and will keep his promises to us. Yes, that's the kind of specious argument that actually persuaded people back then.

To try and twist this into the opposite message, Holding engages in a bogus exegesis of the language of Hebrews 11:1, claiming this passage says faith is "gained by conviction based on evidence" and amounts to a concrete "assurance," that hope is something "earned" by proof, and that "evidence of that which is not seen" means "past performance" in which God has "already proven Himself worthy of our trust by example." But that's not what the verse says, nor is it the message of any of the examples that follow: in every case, each person trusts not on the basis of past fulfillments (no mention is made of any such thing), but on faith that God will fulfill his promise. That is the very point of the chapter: faith came first, *then* the proof. The exact wording of Hebrews 11:1-3 makes this clear. Here is a literal translation:

> **Faith** is the **foundation** of **the things we hope for**, the **proof** of the **deeds** that are **not seen**. For **in this way** the elders were **given evidence**. Through **faith** we **observe** that the ages of time have been arranged by the spo-ken word of God, so that what **became seen** arose out of what was **not made clear**.

The word 'faith' (*pistis*) means "trust," and here the message is not that trust must be earned, but that trust must be placed in God *first*, and only *later* will our trust be vindicated, for the evidence we can't see now will only become clear later on. Hebrews 11:1 does not say "evidence" is the foundation of trust, or the foundation of our expectations, or the proof we seek. Instead, trust *by itself* is the foundation of our expectations, meaning we rest our hopes on trust *rather than evidence*. Indeed, we have all the "proof" we need *not* from any "iron clad evidence" that Holding pretends they had, but from our *trust in what we can't yet see*. That's what this passage plainly says.

In every example that follows this opening passage the elders were "given evidence" *after* they trusted, not before, and that is what Hebrews is saying here: that we rest our expectations on trust, trust that what we hope will happen, will happen, even though we can't see it now. Even beyond that, the only evidence Hebrews mentions us having is our "faith" that everything is going according to God's plan, and the only evidence

Hebrews offers for *that* is the Old Testament, which we must simply "trust" is a true account of what actually happened. No other evidence is ever mentioned. That's the reasoning that won the hearts of Christian converts.

Once I exposed Holding's apparent deception regarding the actual meaning of Hebrews 11, Holding resorted to the desperate tactic of claiming that "as a noun, *pistis* is a word that was used as a technical rhetorical term for *forensic proof*" and that "examples of this usage are found in the works of Aristotle and Quintiallian" (*sic*), though for some reason Holding never tells us where (most curiously since Quintilian wrote in Latin, not Greek). All he offers is one example from the Bible instead. That should raise a suspicious eye. The word *pistis* primarily means "belief" or "trust," hence "faith," *not* "proof" in Holding's intended sense (much less "forensic proof"). As you can see from any decent lexicon the word only means "proof" in specialized contexts, and even then only in the broadest sense of *any* argument or method of persuasion, whether forensic, empirical, or otherwise. Hence, though in special contexts *pistis* can refer to any form of assurance (including evidence), to claim from this that "faith" means "evidence" is simply a con.

A *pistis* (plural *pisteis*) in the formal terminology of rhetoric is not a "proof" in Holding's sense, but an "argument" or "act of persuasion," literally any attempt at forming a belief in the minds of an audience. Rhetoric excluded all *pisteis* except rational and emotive modes of persuasion, though there were other modes not accepted within rhetorical science (such as appeals to scripture or private revelation or "confirming miracles," the very modes of *pistis*-formation that I'll demonstrate the Christians preferred in Chapter 17). The modes considered acceptable among the rational elite are described in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.[276] Here a modern translation correctly renders *pisteis* as "modes of persuasion" rather than the more inaccurate or misleading "proofs."[277] It's clear from Aristotle's actual discussion that *pistis* is not in itself "a technical rhetorical term for forensic proof" but a technical term for *any* method of persuasion, and that it's only *certain kinds of pisteis* that are acceptable, or characteristic of forensic inquiry. Though belief or trust can be *created* by "proof" in the broadest sense, there were proofs of different kinds, and *which kinds* of "proof" Christians asked or sought is exactly the matter in dispute, and which I've shown above (and in later chapters) did not

include “forensic proof” at all. In fact, there is little evidence of *any* effective empirical, historical research (of the kind Holding’s argument requires) being among their preferred or advocated “proofs” (as I argue in Chapters 7, 13, and 17).

Which brings us to Holding’s only alleged “example” of *pistis* meaning “forensic proof,” in Acts 17:31. Here he fallaciously treats the English word “assurance” in modern Bible translations as meaning “proof” in an empirical, forensic sense, which is not even correct English, much less valid procedure (one of the very reasons we need to learn the original language and not rely on translations is that ancient words carried a different sphere of connotations than modern words do). If I “assure” you of something, generally this means I am *not* giving you evidence, but at any rate it in no way *entails* I am. Though I could assure you with evidence, I could also assure you in other ways, such as asking you to trust me. Hence Acts *literally* says that God “provided everyone with the belief that he raised [Jesus] from the dead,” in other words, God “assured everyone” of this. It does not say how. Hence my analysis in Chapter 17 will survey all the evidence we actually have of the sorts of ways Christians asked or expected to be assured. Though “evidence” occasionally comes up, what is asked or offered is rarely evidence sought through careful, empirical research or inquiry, or even evidence pertinent to the claim, but a very different kind of evidence altogether, most of which Aristotle would not have accepted as valid. Hence my analysis above of Holding’s attempt to rescue Hebrews 11:1 exposes what I can only now believe are his attempts to deceive.

Where Holding Gets it Right

For all that, there is one thing that persecution and scorn *did* do to the Church: it changed it. Everyone who could find the same hope and moral vision in more accepted pagan philosophies and mystery cults would certainly prefer the easier road. It was only the desperate and fed up, who did not find these alternatives satisfying, who would find Christianity attractive at any price. And that gradually changed the character of the Church itself. Only the most radical or the most desperate filled the bulk of the movement. This included those who actually wanted martyrdom or weren't afraid of it but impressed and encouraged by it, those who found in Christianity something absent from philosophy and paganism but that they badly wanted, and even those who (like Tatian) had actually grown *disgusted* with those alternatives and took to Christianity as a backlash against elite arrogance. This may well be why Christianity so quickly became radicalized into a predominately Sarcicist religion (as I suggest in Chapter 3). Since that sect was the *only* religion guaranteeing a resurrection of the flesh on easy terms (Judaism offered it only on very hard terms, while other Christian sects offered something different), all the people in the Roman Empire who *wanted* that (regardless of their beliefs) would have flocked to Christianity, while many others would find a better deal on even easier terms in pagan philosophy or salvation cults.

This selection effect in successful recruitment may also be a reason why Christianity was a slow starter. Because it appealed to a psychologically select segment of society, it never gained a very large following until centuries after its origin, after social conditions (and the Church itself) had changed enormously. To that extent Holding is certainly correct. Had Christianity won over a majority of the Empire in a single century, then maybe he would have an argument (contrast, for example, the fantastically rapid and remarkably complete success of the Scientific Revolution). But Christian success came nowhere near that, least of all within its first hundred years (we shall examine its actual scale of success in Chapter 18). Persecution no doubt played a part in that poor showing. But it wasn't enough to keep the Church from growing, even to the extent that it did.

There were plenty of deprived and disgruntled people it could appeal to, and it didn’t need proof of the resurrection to win them over.

Conclusion

In the end, Holding is right to say that the hardships Christianity presented, though they mustn't be so exaggerated, were nevertheless enough that "it is quite unlikely that anyone would have gone the distance for the Christian faith at any time—unless it had something tangible behind it." This is always true. It has been true of every morally demanding idealistic movement in history, whether we're talking about the dawn of Islam or Soviet Marxism. But as we've seen, here and in several other chapters, that "something tangible" did not have to be "irrefutable" evidence of a historical event, such as Jesus rising from the dead. In none of these mass movements throughout human history involving a widespread willingness to suffer and sacrifice, has the motive ever been anything like that, but always a socio-moral ideal. Christianity was surely no different. Indeed, its social program was the one truly tangible thing it had to offer, and that was attractive and alluring all on its own.

Once the battle lines were drawn in this cultural war of compassion against insolence, brotherhood against exploitation, justice against corruption, and equality against inequity, there would surely be plenty of volunteer soldiers fighting for the Christian side. And like all volunteers for every just war in history, they would be fully prepared to assume the burdens of battle, with all its attendant miseries, sacrifices, and risks. That's simply human nature. The shame is that the Christian Church eventually succumbed to the very corruption, villainy, and injustice it began its faith fighting against. In the meantime, even for its claim to divine backing, there was ample evidence to meet the standards of those who actually converted (as we'll see in Chapters 13 and 17). So evidence of the resurrection itself really needed to be no better than the sincere devotion of missionaries—and nothing more (see Chapter 7)—which in turn required no more than biologically and culturally explicable visions of the divine, or a passionate, compassionate belief in a greater social good (see Chapter 10).

9. Was a God Incarnate Always Repugnant?

Incarnation Among the Jews

James Holding cites Earl Doherty for the argument that Jews would never believe "that a human man was the Son of God," much less deserved "all the titles of divinity and full identification with the ancient God of Abraham." Therefore, Holding argues, Jesus must have proved he *was* the God of Abraham. Of course, Holding neglects to mention that Doherty can use the exact same evidence to argue the reverse: that originally Jesus was never a literal human man, but always a heavenly being, an intermediary and *representative* of God.[278] Doherty's construction of the evidence is plausible, but not thereby proved. But neither is Holding's position proved. Therefore, the logic of Holding's argument here does not work: from what Holding presents we cannot decide whether Jesus gave "proof" of his divinity or whether early Christians rejected the very theology that later Christians developed. Both are consistent with the premise Holding gives in this section of his argument, but only one is consistent with Holding's conclusion, and to pick one theory over another is unjustified on this evidence alone.

Holding could perhaps justify this by presenting evidence that the Christians of Paul's time believed what later Christians claimed. But there's nothing in the evidence from Paul himself that Jesus was ever thought to be God Incarnate while residing on earth. All the evidence there is consistent with the view that Jesus was merely a man, a Messiah possessed by the Spirit of God, who was *adopted* by God (either at his birth, baptism, or death) and thus was the "Son of God" only in a legal and spiritual sense, not a literal sense. Indeed, Paul outright says that Jesus "was *born* from the seed of David in respect to the flesh," but "*ordained* the Son of God in power in respect to the spirit of holiness, *from the resurrection of the dead*." In other words, from the seed of David he was a man, but after his resurrection he was *appointed* Son of God—when he was not flesh, but spirit (Romans 1:3-4). The words are unmistakable: Jesus *genomenos*, "came into being," "was born" a descendant of David (from *gignomai*), and then *horistheis*, "was separated out," "distinguished," "marked," "ordained"—the word in fact often meaning

"deified" (from *horizô*)—not in the flesh, but in the spirit, and not in life, but after death. It is true, however, that a few other passages from Paul imply preexistence, so (if we assume these other passages were not scribal interpolations) many scholars take this verse as representing the original gospel, and Paul's view as a more Platonic development implying spirit possession (see discussion of Philo's "Son of God" later in this chapter).

It was already standard Jewish understanding that every "Messiah" ("Anointed" and "King") was adopted by God at his anointing and thus became a Son of God, including King David himself.[279] And the earliest Christians made this universal: Paul says every Christian, through joining Christ's spirit, became an adopted son of God.[280] Contrary to Holding, there is nothing un-Jewish about this. We also know of some early Jewish Christian groups (like the Ebionites) who stuck to this view, against the emerging, and largely Gentile "orthodoxy" of the second century, which saw fit even to doctor the Gospel of Mark in an attempt to eliminate its adoptionistic slant.[281] Even when the idea arose (whenever it actually did) that Christ was a preexistent spirit that descended into the womb of Mary to form the flesh of Jesus, the Christians were not deviating from what was acceptable to many Jews of the time: God could certainly create flesh, and the Spirit of the Lord could certainly inhabit a living person. This would not be the Nicene view of a literal identity between God and Flesh. But the Nicene view would be centuries in the making. In Christianity's first hundred years, insofar as it remained Jewish at all, there is no evidence supporting the exact formula of the Nicene creed. What reliable evidence we have is entirely compatible with a view that God remained incorporeal and enthroned in Heaven even as his spirit animated the body of Jesus. That did not contradict Jewish ideology. Indeed, it conformed to it: for the Spirit of the Lord was *expected* to enter the body of Israel's human King, as well as the bodies of God's prophets.[282]

For example, Colossians 1:15-18 doesn't even say when the preexisting 'spirit-Jesus' (created as the "image" of God) actually entered the 'human-Jesus'—it says nothing about this happening at birth, much less through a virgin's womb (as opposed to at his baptism, as Mark implies, or even his resurrection, as Paul says in Romans 1:4), nor does this passage say anything about the 'human-Jesus' literally being God.[283] Holding once implied (though he now denies it) that any time Paul says "Son of God" he meant God Incarnate, but the evidence of this chapter

already refutes that assumption, and scholars agree with me. At any rate, Holding does try to prove Paul believed Jesus was an eternal being, but that's irrelevant, as it doesn't pertain to whether Jesus was literally God Incarnate in the Nicene sense. Some of Holding's arguments are dubious anyway. For example, he tries to argue that Paul called Christ "Wisdom," and since "Wisdom" was an eternal being, so must Christ have been. But Holding cites a verse that challenges this very argument: 1 Corinthians 1:30 says "Christ Jesus *became* Wisdom to us from God," using *egenêthê*, the passive aorist of "become," meaning at a specific point in time Jesus came into the state of being "Wisdom" by an act of God. This conforms to the view that Jesus was not always Wisdom, but was appointed Wisdom at a later time. And at any rate, there is nothing here about Jesus existing eternally. In like fashion, 1 Corinthians 1:24 says Jesus was both Wisdom and the Power of God, yet Romans 1:4 says Jesus was *appointed* into Power at his resurrection—so this was not an eternal condition, either.

So again the only passage of merit here is Colossians 1:15-18, if we trust that letter is authentic (some scholars doubt it). But even what is said here does not establish that Jesus was God Incarnate in the Nicene sense. To the contrary, it specifically says the Son (not yet Jesus) was the *image* (*eikôn*) of God, not God himself (read Colossians 1:15). Hence, regardless of how Christians evolved their ideas in following centuries, this particular passage agrees with what I've already said about the Jewish ideology of divine possession: Jesus, like all Jewish prophets and kings, was possessed by the spirit of God—and in this case not even by God, but a lesser spirit, the Son, who was created by God ("firstborn *of all that was created*," Colossians 1:15), and who was merely God's "image," not God Himself. This Son was literally, and meaningfully, "firstborn" twice: once at creation (Colossians 1:15), then again at his resurrection (Colossians 1:18), which became the dawn of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). But Colossians still does not say when the man Jesus came to be possessed by this spirit (hence becoming the Christ)—whether at birth, baptism, or death.

Nor was the idea of a preexistent spiritual son of God a novel idea among the Jews anyway. Paul's contemporary, Philo, interprets the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 6:11-12 in just such a way. In the Septuagint this says to place the crown of kingship upon "Jesus," for "So says Jehovah the Ruler of All, 'Behold the man named 'Rises', and he

shall rise up from his place below and he shall build the House of the Lord'." This pretty much *is* the Christian Gospel. Philo was a Platonic thinker, so he could not imagine this as referring to "a man who is compounded of body and soul," but thought it meant an "incorporeal being who in no respect differs from the divine image" whom "the Father of the Universe has caused to spring up as the eldest son." Then Philo says, "In another passage, he calls this son the firstborn," and says "he who is thus born" imitates "the ways of his father." The whole passage in Philo reads:

> "Behold, the man named Rises!" is a very novel appellation indeed, if you consider it as spoken of a man who is compounded of body and soul. But if you look upon it as applied to that incorporeal being who in no respect dif-fers from the divine image, you will then agree that the name of 'Rises' has been given to him with great felicity. For the Father of the Uni-verse has caused him to rise up as the eldest son, whom, in another passage, he calls the firstborn. And he who is thus born, imitates the ways of his father...[284]

In the same book, Philo says even if no one is "worthy to be called a Son of God," we should still "labor earnestly to be adorned according to his firstborn Logos, the eldest of his angels, the ruling archangel of many names," and notably Jesus is *also* called the firstborn Logos, and Christians were *also* called upon to try and emulate him and adorn themselves like him.[285] Elsewhere Philo adds "there are two Temples of God, and one is this cosmos, wherein the High Priest is his Firstborn Son, the Divine Logos."[286] Compare these remarks with Colossians 1:12-19 and Hebrews 1:1-14, and the connections are obvious. Likewise with Zechariah 6:11-13, which not only says Jesus will "build the temple of the Lord," but "he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne, and he shall be a priest upon his throne."

That sure sounds a lot like what the Christians were saying—and this from a devout Jew! Not all Jews were Platonists, either. Simply couple Philo's idea with the more common Jewish belief that the Spirit of God can "rest upon" ordinary human beings—and in fact *must* do so in the case of prophets and kings—and you have the early Christian Christology. Therefore, we can prove nothing un-Jewish about what Christians taught in the first century. Certainly there would be Jews opposed to any Christian

idea, as there were numerous Jewish factions all opposed to each other—the Pharisees against the Sadducees, the Essenes against the Pharisees, the Scribes against the Baptists, the Jerusalem rabbis against the Galilean rabbis, and so on. In the words of John Barclay, "there was no universal template of 'normative' Judaism," even in Palestine, but especially in the Hellenized Diaspora.[287] And this proves quite the opposite of Holding's assumption: since there were many different ways to conceive of God and his mission even among the Jews themselves, no conclusion can be drawn about what "all" Jews would think from the example of only a few—much less from a few within only a few specific sects. And there is even *less* reason to focus only on Jews who were ideologically opposed to the Christian message. That can tell us nothing about what other Jews who were *sympathetic* to that message thought. You can't simply attribute to their friends the beliefs of their enemies, especially when it's probably not a coincidence that Christ became more literally God Incarnate precisely as Christianity became less Jewish.

Incarnation Among the Gentiles

So much for the Jewish perspective. Holding then claims that even "in the Gentile world" the "idea of a god condescending to material form, for more than a temporary visit, of sweating, stinking, going to the bathroom, and especially suffering and dying here on earth" would be "too much to swallow!" I find that an astonishing claim. For Greek and Roman paganism was filled with the idea of ordinary men being or becoming gods. Indeed, as to the idea of a "sweating, stinking, defecating" mortal who dies and then becomes a god, there are so many examples in Greco-Roman religion I can't believe I even need to cite them. This is also the case for the idea of a literal Son of a God who "sweats, stinks, and defecates" and then dies, becoming a God in Heaven. See Chapter 3 for examples like Asclepius, Hercules, Zalmoxis, Attis, the Dioscuri, etc. (and for sources on pagan religion which cite many other examples).

Many of these deities were already literally demigods (the sons of a god) and thus their divine body was trapped inside their body of flesh, which "sweated, stank, and defecated" as no doubt Romulus and Hercules did, yet Romulus was literally and physically an incarnated god from heaven, and Hercules was literally and physically a Son of God. Of course, whether Christians believed Jesus "sweated, stank, and defecated" while on earth is not even established—Holding is assuming this is what was taught or claimed, though we don't really know for sure. The sources we have are silent on this question. There were some elites who balked at such ideas (especially Epicureans like Celsus and Platonists like Plutarch), but they represented a small minority of the population. The incredible ubiquity of belief in countless deified men and earthly divine sons proves this beyond any doubt. Christianity would hit no greater obstacle than every other popular cult worshipping deified mortals.

Lest there be any doubt, Plutarch says point blank that "it seemed credible to the Romans" (and was accepted on the mere testimony of one man) that Romulus was an eternal god who descended from Heaven, lived on earth as a mere mortal, died, then rose again to rejoin the gods. How is that any different from what the Christians preached of Jesus? Even in

Acts, the Lycaonians readily assumed Barnabas and Paul were the gods Zeus and Hermes physically descended from Heaven, declaring that "the gods have become like men and come down to us!"[288] And the Maltans quickly concluded Paul was a god merely because he survived a snake bite.[289] Likewise, Celsus knew several men who manipulated crowds by claiming to be "God or God's Son or the Spirit of God" descended from above, which could only have been a successful scam if the idea was acceptable to enough people to make it worthwhile.[290]

Conclusion

In the end, Holding has not made an adequate case that what Christians *actually* believed in the first century would have been incredible to *all* Jews, much less those Jews who actually accepted the Christian message. Nor has Holding shown that all Gentiles found the idea of a God Incarnate "too much to swallow." To the contrary, there is evidence the early Christian idea of the Savior and Messiah as Son of God was actually right in line with the thinking of many Jews at the time. And we've shown there can be no doubt that a great many Gentiles fully accepted the idea of a God Made Flesh. So there would be no need of "irrefutable" proof to overcome any hostility to this idea among either group. Indeed, Holding's logic argues against his own case: for the fact that most Jews and Gentiles rejected Christianity in its first hundred years would suggest the evidence was *insufficient* to persuade those who actually did scoff at the idea of incarnated gods. There is not a single example on record of anyone in the first century who clearly scoffed at that idea subsequently becoming a Christian—yet only such evidence would offer any support to Holding's argument.

Even then, Holding would still have to present evidence that what changed their mind was "irrefutable" evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, rather than something less impressive to us today—like an argument solely from scripture. Holding can present no such evidence. Therefore, his argument is unsuccessful. In fact, it's inherently dubious. For why would rising from the dead prove Jesus was God? How *would* Jesus prove it? N.T. Wright himself, a staunch believer and expert on the subject, warns that "it has too often been assumed that if Jesus was raised from the dead this automatically 'proves' the entire Christian worldview—including the belief that he was and is" God or God's son. But as Wright explains, it does not—there are Jews even today who believe Jesus rose from the dead (and did many other miraculous things), but conclude from this "that he was and is a great prophet to whom Israel should have paid attention at the time," and nothing more.[291] Wright's evidence, in that same chapter, for an early belief in a literal incarnation is far weaker. But it's notable that even

someone like Wright who is convinced of *that*, nevertheless still rejects assumptions like Holding's, i.e. that proving Jesus rose proves Christianity true.

Many who were not gods rose from the dead, even in Jewish legend (as we saw in Chapter 3)—in fact, from a Jewish point of view, such an event would sooner prove Jesus a great prophet than a god. Likewise for any of his miracles, which did not exceed in magnitude those of Moses or Elijah. So how would *anyone* come to believe he was God? There is only one possible way: God told them. In other words: visions and interpretations of scripture. Therefore, the *only* evidence that would *ever* convince any Jew that Jesus was the Son of God would be scripture and the word of contemporary prophets (confirmed by their *own* miraculous deeds), neither of which would we ever consider "irrefutable" evidence. And as we'll see in Chapters 10 and 13, this was the only evidence offered in any known case of conversion in the first hundred years—including the 'miracles' of the missionaries themselves, which we also explored in Chapters 6 and 7.

The bottom line is that a Jew who would be convinced by such evidence (and we know those were probably the only Jews Christians actually convinced, as suggested by the evidence in Chapters 13 and 17) would not even need any other evidence, since that was the only evidence possible for such a claim. Therefore, Holding cannot use "objections to incarnation" to confirm the strength of evidence for the *resurrection*, even in principle. At most, this could only confirm the strength of evidence from revelations and scripture—which comes nowhere near "irrefutable" evidence in our sense, and is not evidence *at all* except to those who *already* accept that God talks to people, and thereby inspired the entire Bible as well as the Christian prophets.

10. Would Groupthinkers Never Switch Groups?

Getting it Backwards

At this point James Holding argues that the very anti-establishment message Christianity preached would have prevented its success—when in actual fact, that was probably the primary reason it *did* succeed (to the extent it actually did). As I've shown in several chapters already, the society of the Roman Empire was producing such a scale of injustice and discontent that a message of equality, of doing away with all those things people saw as the cause of their plight, would have been very *popular* among those whom Christianity actually won over—quite the opposite of Holding's conclusion. Nor was this message new: the Essenes already preached it, winning the praise of even elite Jews like Josephus, Philo, and Herod, and even some Gentiles like Pliny the Elder, thus proving the message was already attractive to some Jews and Gentiles. And there had been several pagan precedents as well in the centuries running up to Christianity, dreams of 'equalizing' the social playing field to produce a moral utopia (see Chapters 2 and 5).

Of the Essenes in particular, Pliny the Elder writes that even though they're celibate and thus do not restore their numbers by having children, still:

> Day after day their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life. Thus it is, that through thou-sands of ages, incredible to relate, this people eternally prolongs its existence, without a sin-gle birth taking place there; so fruitful a source of population to it is that weariness of life which is felt by others.[292]

This proves exactly the *opposite* of what Holding claims: far from being unpopular, the communist message of Christianity could find recruits even before Christianity began. The Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Paul, says there were people like this all over the known world in his day, who were sick of wealth and society and were abandoning property

and family to follow lives of philosophy and piety within Essene-like societies, and he praises them for it.[293] And as we observed in Chapter 2, the Christians made entry into such a life far easier and more attractive, by doing away with circumcision and all the arduous rules and separatism of Essene life. Thus, Christianity would have found many more converts than the Essenes did. And unlike most (though not all) Essenes, the Christians recruited women and allowed marriage, thus doubling its pool of recruits, as well as benefiting from the inevitable growth produced by raising children into the faith. All the improvements made by Christianity on the Essene social structure would have especially increased its attractiveness to Gentiles.

It's noteworthy that Pliny the Elder was apparently a better sociologist than Holding, for he was keen enough to observe the motive for joining such a movement: people were getting sick and tired of the present state of society, and the miseries and difficulties it entailed. I've already addressed this fact in adequate detail in Chapters 5 and 8, so I won't repeat that analysis here. The conclusion is clear: the idea of eliminating social distinctions was clearly attractive to a significant segment of the population at the time, especially when it could be achieved without doing violence to the entrenched social system. James Holding certainly presents no evidence to the contrary.

That may be why Holding's only "evidence" consists not of any actual ancient witness or source (or any real evidence at all), but a purely speculative theoretical argument supposedly based on the sociological work of Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey.[294] But Malina and Neyrey do *not* make anything like the argument Holding does—they never argue the social context of early Christianity made recruitment too difficult. Rather, Holding merely uses what they *do* argue (that the ancient social context was different from ours) in an attempt to keep his own argument afloat. Yet what Malina and Neyrey argue does not support Holding. To the contrary, it provides a sound case *against* him. And that point will occupy the rest of this chapter. Though I do find much of what Malina says persuasive (even if he sometimes exaggerates and oversimplifies), even if you reject Malina's analysis of ancient society, this chapter still shows that what Malina has actually argued (whether he is correct or not) contradicts what Holding claims.

What Do Malina & Neyrey *Really* Say?

Holding correctly describes the thesis of Malina and Neyrey in *Portraits of Paul* (POP), that "in the ancient world, people took their major identity from the various groups to which they belonged" rather than from the self-actualized individualism of many modern societies. "There can be little doubt," they say, "that our New Testament witnesses were collectivist persons living in collectivist cultures" (POP 11). Accordingly, Malina and Neyrey demonstrate that **(1)** "group goals naturally precede individual goals" (POP 11), so that (quoting Josephus, then Plutarch) "the welfare of the community must take precedence" over the individual's interests, and "no one is his own master" but everyone is "subject to some authority figure" (POP 3). As a consequence, **(2)** individuals primarily defined themselves by their "group of origin" and their "place of origin" (POP 3), and "were attuned to the values, attitudes, and beliefs of their in-group, with which they shared a common fate" (POP 16) such that kinship and citizenship were the first and foremost elements of self-description (POP 17-18). And this, in turn, meant that **(3)** these two in-groups (one's household and political affiliation) "served as conscience and guide" to moral action (POP 18). All that is more or less true. And as a movement, Christianity conformed to all these expectations (as I'll show).

However, Malina and Neyrey do *not* say that individuals have no individual thoughts, desires, or aspirations, only that they tend to suppress them for the sake of social harmony (POP 212-18). Yet this entails that there *be* social harmony. As soon as conforming to the group *fails* to produce what is expected—social harmony and communal good—all bets are off. The collectivist mindset is then motivated to *reject* the failing group as-it-is and seek reform or attachment to another, successful group—or create one, if no working group was already available, or internal reform was blocked.[295] This is how collectivist societies evolve and change. Many examples fill history, from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the post-war industrialization of Japan. The successful introduction of Buddhism (a foreign Indian religion) into both Japan and China also provides a good model. So Holding cannot claim this kind of thing was

improbable. And Bruce Malina agrees with me: he confirmed to me personally that everything I just wrote in this paragraph is correct.[296]

Malina and Neyrey also point out that in collectivist cultures an individual will still harbor individualistic desires, but merely *lie* to his in-group, telling them what they want to hear, while actually seeking his own self-interest (POP 212-18). In fact, they argue, this practice of acceptable deception would be a common behavior (as we'll see regarding their discussion of prophets below), which creates a serious problem for Holding. For this means many could convert to Christianity for purely personal, individualistic reasons, and only *tell* others that their reasons were collectivist and harmony-seeking—or anything else that the group, given its values and presuppositions, would accept as a valid reason—such as that God told them it was the right thing to do. This also means the entire Christian religion could have been a morally acceptable deception, taking perfectly practical and rational plans to fix a broken social system and framing them within the very structure of religious miracle and revelation that would be acceptable to the general collectivist culture of the time. I am not here arguing that either *is* the case, only that if anyone agrees with Malina and Neyrey's analysis—as Holding must in order to rest his argument on it—both of these conclusions must also be accepted as real and credible possibilities. Malina and Neyrey are careful to explain that collectivist societies have a different idea of "truth" than individualist societies like ours (as well as a different idea of proper behavior regarding the truth), and I agree: this is crucial to understanding Christianity's origin and early development. I'll examine this issue below.

Another conclusion reached by Malina and Neyrey that spells trouble for Holding is that "out-group persons have no right to in-group truth" (POP 215), which explains why the Gospel was hidden behind parables, not only by Jesus (as claimed in Mark 4:11-12 and 4:33-34), but plausibly by later Christians, too. The Gospel of Mark, for example, may well hide the truth behind a whole extended parable, whose real meaning would be told only to mature initiates (as suggested by passages in Paul like 1 Corinthians 2:4-8, 3:1-2, and 2 Corinthians 12:4), and concealed from everyone else. This was a common device in ancient religion, as attested by Plutarch, Herodotus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Apuleius, and others.[297] Since Mark was the first Gospel to be written down, such a motive would be available, because access to oral tradition could be

controlled, but access to a written document could not. Therefore, it would be necessary to conceal the true meaning of a tradition when it was written down, lest it fall into the wrong hands. Indeed, the "true meaning" might not even be explained to *most Christians*, but—as both Paul and Origen say—only to the most "mature" in the Church.[298]

Thus, when it comes to explaining the consequences of the Malina-Neyrey theory, Holding only tells half the story—leaving out the other half that undermines his case. In a similar fashion, Holding correctly describes Malina and Neyrey's point that "in a group-oriented society, you took your identity from your group leader, and people needed the support and endorsement of others to support their identity." But then he immediately departs from anything Malina and Neyrey actually say by claiming "Christianity forced a severing of social and religious ties," which is not true:

First, there was never any command to sever social ties in Christianity, but often the contrary: to obey and maintain the exterior social order, even while creating and entering a superior social order within the Church. Christians were to obey pagan and Jewish community leaders (see Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:12-17), remain slaves even to pagan or Jewish masters (see Colossians 3:22 and 1 Timothy 6:1-2), keep their marriages (even to pagans: 1 Corinthians 7:12-16) and their jobs (complete with pagan bosses and colleagues), and meet their civic duties (such as serving in the army or government and paying taxes, e.g. Romans 13:6-7). Unlike many (though not all) Essenes, the Christians did *not* isolate themselves from the society they held to be corrupt, but lived openly within it and actively engaged it. Though there were some teachings that justified breaking ties when those ties held you back from following God, this was never said to be a *requirement*, and we have little evidence of it being commonly done.

Holding can present no evidence from the first century that becoming Christian *entailed* leaving all of your social or civic in-groups—insofar as a convert had any, which many may not have. Many widows, for example, without families or citizenship, had no social identity-group, which was a prominent reason Christianity was so successful in recruiting them. And there must surely have been quite a large number of men in a similar situation of social drift, migrants with no surviving family ties and no citizenship, for whom Christianity would offer exactly what a

collectivist would most want: a strong social in-group to establish their identity. For example, Magnus Zetterholm presents a good case on demographic, epidemiological, and sociological evidence that ancient cities were major centers of disconnected and displaced people in search of a group to belong to, which accords well with the evidence that Christianity was always most successful in cities.[299] Likewise, even among those who had such ties, there would inevitably be many who did not benefit from them: citizens with no vote, children neglected in favor of their elder siblings, migrant laborers, and so on. Since belonging to such groups would not meet their collectivist expectations, the prospect of entering an in-group that *did* meet those expectations would be attractive. Both situations (loss of social identity or discontent with that identity) no doubt explain recruitment into the Essene sect, for example. Malina himself appeals to both in his explanation of the origin and growth of the Church, in all his books on that subject.

Second, few converts would see themselves as severing religious ties, but quite the contrary: Jewish converts would see Christianity as a perfected fulfillment of Judaism, not a new religious commitment. They were not "abandoning" their faith, but *realizing* it. Becoming Christian was no different for a Jew than becoming a Baptist or an Essene or a Pharisee. Consider, for example, how Josephus sampled them all (as well as the Sadducees) before choosing which "in-group" to join, holding this procedure up as a model for others to admire and follow.[300] And there were numerous other sects besides these, all meeting in different places, with different ideas of how to follow God's law, and all competing for "converts" from among the general population of Jews. In fact, many (if not most) Christian Jews in Palestine remained obedient to the Torah law. But those who accepted the Pauline doctrine of liberation from that law were not doing anything unprecedented—most Jewish sects already rejected Mishnah law, and some even rejected Torah as well (like the Nasaraeans and Ossaeans).[301] Indeed, we know of at least ten and possibly over thirty Jewish sects thriving in the time of Jesus, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Hemerobaptists, Nasaraeans, Ossaeans, Therapeutae, Hypsistarians, Masbotheans, Samaritans, Galilaeans, Dositheans, Sebuaeans, Gorothenes, and many others we know by name, including many subdivisions even within those just named.[302]

Holding often quotes David DeSilva and Bruce Malina to the effect that everyone in society would be harassing "deviants" to return to 'orthodox' beliefs and values, and therefore no movement could break away from the community's beliefs and values unless they had iron clad proof they were right. But Holding is abusing his sources—DeSilva never says deviant groups required such proof, nor does he argue that what motivated Christians to break away was "evidence of the resurrection"; while Malina explains in detail how and why deviant groups could and often did break with the community solely for reasons of discontent.[303] And here the evidence quite destroys Holding's case: for in actual fact, *every* Jew was a deviant—to some other Jew. There was no 'orthodoxy' but dozens of competing sects. They all differed and often fell into heated debate over the proper beliefs and community values, yet they all thrived. Not only did some reject the Torah, but some credited an angel with the creation, some worshipped Moses as Christ, some permitted obeisance to idols, some practiced astrology, some accepted baptism as an atonement for sins, some rejected a literal interpretation of the scriptures, some scorned the Jerusalem Temple, some may have believed Herod was the messiah, some denied the existence of souls or angels or spirits of any kind, and some denied resurrection altogether.

As a result, every Jewish sect was a deviant sect to at least some other Jewish sect. They were all attacking each other and trying to convert people to their way of thinking. It's no surprise that Christianity arose at the very time in history when schismatic deviations from orthodox Judaism were more frequent and more successful than ever before or since. Clearly, efforts by groups like the Pharisees to "harass back into the fold" other Jews were a dismal failure before the Jewish War, while after that Christians already had a foothold in the even-more-accepting pagan society, which was itself awash with countless different religious sects and philosophical groups. Christianity was just another Jewish sect to them, and many Jewish sects were already significantly accepted within pagan communities.

So on Holding's view, how could the Jews have fragmented into so many competing sects? By his argument, that should have been impossible. Yet it happened. As for Gentiles, most would not have anything like strong religious ties—paganism was never exclusive or obligatory in the way Judaism was for Jews. Not even the mystery cults

were like that. And like those mystery cults, Christianity simply re-explained all the phenomena of paganism. All the gods still existed—they were now merely identified as agents of Satan, an argument already made by the Zoroastrians and repeated by Manichaeans, and generally shared by the Jews. And we know the Jews already won over Gentiles on a regular basis, and that Christianity would only have done better (all as I demonstrated in Chapters 2, 4, and 6).

Of course, Holding admits Christianity "did provide its own community support in return" for severing other connections, though as already noted there is no evidence such severing was common in the first century, beyond the switching of group affiliations that was already going on in the ancient world all the time—in religion, politics, geography, the army. Indeed, Holding asks how the Christian offer of a superior in-group "explains why people join in the first place," which is a good question: What explains why anyone joined *any* new social group in antiquity? Why did so many become Essenes or Baptists? Why did Gentiles become Jews? Why did so many sons of freedmen seek to achieve a higher social class? Why did men in the army seek promotion to higher social and military status? Why did so many migrate to join new geographical communities? Why did so many migrants then seek to become citizens of their new cities? Or seek the Roman citizenship for that matter? Why did so many slaves seek to become freedmen? Why did so many "barbarians" seek to Romanize or Hellenize themselves? Why did so many pagans join the religious societies of foreign cults like that of Isis, Cybele, or Mithras? Why join the Epicurean Garden and thus "become an Epicurean"? Or a Stoic? Or a Cynic for that matter, which truly *did* entail severing social ties? Why did Lucian regard changing his status, from a stoneworker to an educated gentleman, to be the most excellent thing that could happen to anyone?[304] Holding's erroneous account of Malina and Neyrey's thesis is incapable of explaining any of this—yet this was all routine in the Roman Empire. Unlike India, for example, social status and position was remarkably fluid within the Roman imperial system. What Malina and Neyrey *actually* argue explains this perfectly—and thus explains conversion to Christianity perfectly, for the motives and causes were the same as in all other cases of voluntary social relocation (as we'll see below).

Holding gets Malina and Neyrey right when he says “a person like Jesus could not have kept a ministry going unless those around him supported him,” but then completely departs from anything Malina and Neyrey argue when he says “a merely human Jesus could not have met this demand.” That’s a *non sequitur*. Indeed, Jesus “must have provided convincing proofs of his power and authority to maintain a following, and for a movement to have started and survived well beyond him” as Holding says—but nothing supernatural would be necessary for that, any more than it was necessary to win converts to any other cult, school, or social group of the day. Were superhuman powers required for Epicurus, Zeno, Aristotle, or Diogenes to found lasting philosophical communities? Did Essenes and promoters of the cults of Isis, Mithras, and Cybele all require superhuman powers to win converts? Were the Gentiles who entered or connected themselves with Judaism only persuaded by supernatural powers? Did Buddhists actually prove their supernatural might in order to win over large segments of the much-more-collectivist Chinese and Japanese populations? Quite simply: No.

I’ll discuss the actual Christian tactics of persuasion in Chapter 13. But Holding’s reasoning (which is found nowhere in Malina and Neyrey) is that “a merely human Jesus would have had to live up to the expectations of others and would have been abandoned ... at the first sign of failure.” But Holding never explains how that conclusion follows from Malina and Neyrey’s thesis. Instead, his argument actually ignores their sociological model in two crucial respects:

First, there is no evidence Christ’s followers ultimately perceived anything he did as a failure. As far as they saw it, he was a complete success—even his execution received group approbation as a success.[305] Since the group *defines* success and failure—and that’s exactly what Malina and Neyrey argue—once Jesus had a following, whether anything that then happened would be regarded as a “failure” would depend entirely on the perceptions of the in-group. Perceptions of everyone outside the group would not matter. As long as the in-group called his execution a success, it would *be* a success. Period. That’s how groupthink works. And this follows even when there may be temporary wavering or doubt—though the Gospels portray the disciples as abandoning Jesus (though there is no support for this in Paul and it may well be a dramatic invention), they also portray the disciples soon having visions of Jesus reaffirming

that his execution was a success. Since Jesus was their leader, this would define his execution as a success. And all other members of the in-group would believe what the disciples, as appointed representatives of their leader, told them about this. We can debate whether these visions of Jesus were real and physical, or only imagined or fabricated (see below), but neither would make the success of Christianity any more successful, or any less. Because it made no difference.

Thus, Malina and Neyrey's thesis can (and does) explain Christianity's success without requiring any appeal to anything supernatural. In fact, once again Holding entangles himself a Catch-22. His own argument entails accepting that people would leave one group for another "at the first sign of failure," yet that is exactly how Christianity won converts: the social groups to which future converts belonged at the time, or that were available for them to join, were failing. They were failing by the standards of the groups themselves, at least for some individuals. For them, these in-groups were failing to live up to their own professed ideals, and failing to achieve or realize those things each group itself deemed right and good. Christians then offered them a social group that *wasn't* failing (as explained in Chapters 5 and 6). Thus, by Holding's own reasoning, conversion to Christianity, at least for as many as actually did convert, would be entirely expected. It was not improbable at all. No supernatural evidence was required. The mere fact that their social in-groups were failing, and Christianity's social in-group was succeeding—at meeting the needs and expectations of the community—would be sufficient on Malina and Neyrey's thesis to account for the entirety of Christianity's success in its first hundred years, and beyond.

As Malina himself explains:

> Why did a small group emerge around Jesus? Small groups emerge because some person becomes aware of a need for change, a desire for social satisfaction. That person shares this vision with others who mutually nurture a hope of success in implementing the change in a cultural context in which group formation is expected ... [and after that] Post-Jesus associations ... existed primarily to serve the needs of members: social, informational, sup-port.[306]

And though “they were not concerned at all to reform society,” they *were* concerned to maintain a satisfactory society ‘within’ society, which strove to be *accepted* by outsiders, while realizing ideal social values within the in-group, which would prefigure the perfect society of the cosmic future. “Compelling evidence” never comes up in Malina’s explanation here, much less evidence of the supernatural, and even less that of the resurrection. Only for *later* Christian missionary work does he reference the role of healings, exorcisms, and revelations as elements employed to win converts, and these I’ve addressed already in Chapters 6 and 7, and shall address further in Chapter 13.

And this is how Bruce Malina himself accounts for that success. He has never appealed to Jesus actually being God. He has never said the evidence of Christ’s divinity or resurrection had to be compelling, or anything like that. To the contrary, Malina has consistently argued in numerous books that Christianity’s success was due to the rhetorical skills of its missionaries, who properly contextualized the faith in terms both acceptable and attractive to their collectivist culture. Again, the only reference he ever makes to the evidence Christians appealed to, besides missionary healing and exorcism, was the role of divine revelation—in other words, appeals to religious experience—which he connects to the Jewish prophetic tradition.[307] Never do the miracles of Christ’s ministry or resurrection play any role in Malina’s theory of Christianity’s success. All he argues as necessary were a properly constructed (and properly presented) theology, and appeals to private communications from God affirming that system (which we, today, can neither verify nor falsify as such).

Malina doesn’t even appeal to miracles performed by Christian missionaries as important to their success (again apart from healing and exorcism) since he generally treats miracle reports (especially in the Gospels) as symbolic rather than historical. Some miracle narratives were indeed purely or largely symbolic. But the Christian mission did require some genuine displays of “supernatural” power to prove its divine backing. Holding is right about that, since the appearance of “divine backing” was essential to the Christian solution to popular social problems. However, when we look at what miracles were actually used by the Church (as seen in Paul and Acts), none required any real supernatural power at all—only the perception of it (as discussed in Chapter 6, and I’ll

explore the same point again in Chapter 13). In fact, Malina argues, Christianity was no different in this regard than any other shamanic tradition throughout human history.

Moreover, contrary to Holding's reasoning, merely performing supernatural feats (even the resurrection of Jesus himself) would be incapable of winning converts anyway. In a groupthink culture, those feats had to be acknowledged *by the group* as divine—rather than, for example, demonic, or the product of trickery. If the group appealed to was *already* hostile to the Christian message, it would not define any miracle, even a genuine one from God himself, as divine, but as demonic or fake. That's how groupthink works. As shown in Chapter 3, resurrecting the dead was an expected power of demons and sorcerers, and therefore could be attributed to demonic agency or explained away as a human trick. For instance, crediting trickery is exemplified in Matthew 27:62-66 and 28:11-15. Another available explanation was misdiagnosis, i.e. some sources 'explain away' resurrections by claiming the beneficiary was never really dead but just sleeping (even though there is no way they could know that).

Therefore, even on Holding's assumption that Christians performed real miracles—including a real, thoroughly proven resurrection of their leader—according to Malina and Neyrey's analysis that would *still* be insufficient to account for Christianity's success. Christianity had to demonstrate its miracles were divine, rather than demonic or human, by appealing to values the out-group already accepted—hence the visible social success of the Christian brotherhood was a necessary cause of its further expansion. But as it happens, that was also a *sufficient* cause. By proving that Christianity was a successful social group (fulfilling the core values of various out-groups) it followed necessarily that Christianity had divine backing. For in the ancient view, the divine backing of a community and its success in fulfilling social values were synonymous. To be a success was to be of God. But it follows necessarily that *any* seemingly miraculous feat would then be interpreted by an appropriate out-group as coming from God rather than demonic or human agency. And so nothing that Christians did had to be genuinely supernatural—it only had to seem so. And that's what Malina himself argues.

How Christianity Fits the Malina-Neyrey Model

We've already seen how Christianity exploited its social context perfectly. Furthermore, in Malina and Neyrey's sociological model, we identified three peculiarities of ancient culture that must be taken into account by any correct explanation of Christianity's early success. The Christian message had to conform to the expectations of those social groups it successfully recruited from, but it did not have to conform to the expectations of *other* social groups it did *not* successfully recruit from (such as elite scholars). And to succeed, Christianity had to be perceived as successfully meeting the needs of those groups it successfully recruited from, and those groups had to perceive their current social system as failing to meet those needs. In other words, society had to be perceived as "sick" and in need of fixing, and then Christianity had to offer a "cure" that would fit the expectations of enough people to draw converts and grow.

Within that context: **(1)** Christianity's message had to place community welfare before individual desire, both in principle and in practice (the first defining feature of a successful social group), and it had to place every member of the group under a master who would consistently serve the welfare of the whole (the second defining characteristic of a successful social group); **(2)** its members had to be able to define themselves by "group of origin" and "place of origin," in other words by kinship and citizenship, and see themselves as sharing "a common fate"; and **(3)** this familial and political affiliation had to serve "as conscience and guide" to moral action, in a way that succeeded in meeting universal human needs (food, shelter, love, etc.).

There's no doubt early Christianity satisfied all of these conditions. Therefore, on Malina and Neyrey's thesis, Christianity would have had no trouble succeeding (at least in the manner and degree it did), without what we would consider "irrefutable" evidence of anything except its success in meeting social needs. And that is exactly what Christians appealed to: popular moral values were realized more truly in their brotherhood than in the wider social system as-it-was (see Chapters 5 and 6). Everyone's needs

were cared for, and there was justice, harmony, and brotherly love. Those were ends that most social groups at the time professed to serve, but that none actually succeeded in achieving. Christianity won allegiance by appealing to that disconnect between concept and practice, and offering a solution. That solution did involve a change in certain subordinate social values and perceptions, but those changes were presented as essential in order to fulfill the core goals of society (justice and harmony), which everyone agreed were supposed to take priority over all other concerns.

We already discussed in Chapters 5 and 8 how the social system of the time was failing: though various social groups asserted certain values, those same groups, and especially their leaders, were failing to live up to those values. As a result, those groups would be compelled by their own groupthink to seek a solution to this problem, and that solution had to be either a cultural movement (bottom-up reform) or commitment to a leader who would restore the proper social harmony (top-down reform), or both. Philosophers attempted the former tactic, but did not succeed—precisely because they did not correctly frame their ideas in a way acceptable to the collectivist groups they appealed to. Pretenders to the throne (and various leaders of rebel military movements) attempted the latter tactic, but did not succeed—because the Roman military machine was at the time in perfect working order and thus unbeatable, or (in the case of pretenders who succeeded by *using* that military machine—e.g. Caesar, Vespasian, Severus, Constantine) the ideas of the new leader were not sufficient to cure the disease, and in some cases even made it worse.

In contrast, everyone agrees that Christianity preached brotherhood and justice and the meeting of everyone's needs, and it is clear (from Paul and Acts) that it actually succeeded at practicing what it preached, at least enough to demonstrate (to anyone who cared to sincerely inquire) that the Christian group was succeeding where all other groups were failing. In fact, the small size of the Church in its first hundred years was probably responsible for its ability to practice so successfully what it preached—by following the successful "small town" model of social reinforcement (which is widely known to succeed where urban models fail, due to the problems of mobility and anonymity), and yet settling these small self-regulating communities within larger urban centers all around the Empire, where they could attract maximum attention. This allowed the Church to grow (in a way the Essene sect never could), due to its access to a greater

number of fluid population centers, and by keeping the size of individual communities small, while still linking them together into a larger complex through authoritarian leaders like Paul (a system that was eventually structured into a formal Church hierarchy).

Once the Church became as large as other social institutions of the time, however, it succumbed to the same vanity, conflict, and corruption that they did—thus demonstrating it was *not* in fact up to the task of solving society's problems (in much the same way that Marxism once looked so promising, yet its inevitable outcome proved to be worse than the disease). But in its first few centuries Christianity did look like it was working, in a way the wider social system was not—especially since the major social institutions of the time were *increasingly* failing, getting worse and worse, in exactly those same centuries. This made Christianity look increasingly better, even supernaturally prescient, by comparison, which is an example of the role luck played in securing the ultimate success of Christianity (as we'll examine in Chapter 18). A comparable analogy is how Islam arose at precisely the point when the military capabilities of surrounding empires were in sharp decline, a mere coincidence that nevertheless made sweeping Islamic victories "appear" supernatural, which further secured its ideological success.

In many ways Christianity fit the Malina-Neyrey model perfectly in its first century—that crucial period where a movement will either fail and collapse into obscurity, or gain a stronghold that succeeding generations can then exploit. For example, Holding is quite right that "in the ancient world, it would have been foreign to the mind to not stand in some sort of dependent relationship," which is precisely why subservience to Christ as Lord was so central to the Christian solution to its society's problems. "Let's work together to fix what's wrong" would never have worked in the social context of antiquity, because appeals to individual self-mastery (like the modern American Army recruiting slogan "An Army of One") could not motivate collective action. It was necessary to follow a strong leader, who embodies, serves, and thus realizes the group's ideals. In actual practice, most leaders of the time fell into selfish corruption or aloof insolence, and utterly failed to embody or serve, much less realize, the most important values of their society. The behavior of emperors had already demonstrated by the time of Christ the inevitable decline that was seen to pervade the nature of the entire world: they would start out good,

but grow corrupt or unresponsive with time. The history of Jewish kings, as well as the successors of Alexander, set the same example. Human leaders could never be trusted.

Therefore, since only God can be trusted, God must be our leader, and we must make ourselves totally subservient to Him. As 1 Timothy 6:14-15 says, “Lord Jesus Christ” is “the only dynast, king of kings, and lord of lords.” The *only* one. And in Jewish terms, to say “God is our Lord” also meant “God” through his Anointed King—his “Christ” (which means “Anointed”)—and through his role as a “Jesus” (which means “Savior”). Jesus Christ is the eternal Anointed Savior and therefore the Perfect Leader, to whom all Christians pledged subservience, and whose Spirit inhabits all the baptized. Hence for society to work, the Christians taught, authority must go *directly* from God, to Christ, to the head of every household (see 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 4:15, 5:23). And that makes Christ our King, until “he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:23-25). This is why Jesus is described with every leadership title there was at the time, all the way from Shepherd to God. He was the *ultimate* leader, who would never fail in his appointed role. To follow him, to let him govern your life, was the only way to fix society.

Christians probably proposed this solution because it solved the evident problem not only of failing leaders, but of human middlemen (like the Priesthood, and the Pharisees and Scribes, as well as the administrators of local and imperial power), which were increasingly seen as failing in their duty to uphold the values of their society, and thus were perceived as the very problem in need of solution. By cutting out all human middlemen and serving God’s Perfect Anointed directly, each individual would be placed under the leadership of the only incorruptible leader there was, and therefore such individuals would collectively constitute a properly functioning social group. That was likely one reason why dependence on Torah law could be done away with. The entire basis of that law was a dependence on the Temple cult and the human middlemen who ran it (not only the priests, but the merchants, for example, who sold the animals that Torah law required individuals to buy for atonement sacrifices, etc.). To cut out those middlemen and directly serve under God negated any rationale for the Torah system. It became socially obsolete.[308]

Thus, the need for a subservient social relationship was met by Christianity, and met in a way that would be obviously superior in the eyes of those social groups the Christians evangelized—those who could or did understand, and accept, the existence and social role of God as King (hence Jews and sympathetic or otherwise sincerely religious Gentiles). Likewise, when Holding points out that Christianity sought to erase all social distinctions, he misses the fact that they sought this only *within* the community of the Church itself—Christians never argued for erasing those distinctions *outside* the Church, but in fact argued they should be maintained as much as possible—precisely to ensure peace and harmony.[309]

On the other hand, Holding rightly adds that Christianity also sought to erase all *individual* distinctions, even of "appearance and charisma." This conforms perfectly with Malina and Neyrey's thesis: Christianity was a thoroughly collectivist movement. The individual was being completely subsumed and replaced by the group. The Church becomes the new group, the new social unit, in which there are no true individuals, only limbs joined to one purpose, acting as one body, exactly as Paul repeatedly says.[310] Malina and Neyrey note that this is the case for many collectivist societies even today (quoting Triandis): "the self is coterminous with ... a group the way a hand is related to the person whose hand it is" (POP 10), which is *exactly* the way Christians described themselves. This was the very social ideal they sold to potential converts. There was nothing radical about that. It was exactly what the society of the time could understand and embrace.

Likewise, Holding rightly says that "in a group-oriented society, you took your identity from your group leader, and people needed the support and endorsement of others to support their identity," but he misses the fact that Christianity fulfilled this requirement, too. Christians did take their identity from their group leader—Christ—hence they took the name *christiani*—literally, in fact, as his adopted brothers.[311] Indeed, the word *christianus* is formed from a personal name (*Christus*) and a terminator (-*ianus*) in a construction typical in antiquity of political or kin affiliation, for instance the Flaviani are members of the Flavius family, and the Pompeiani were those who supported Pompey against Caesar in the Roman Civil War. Likewise, Christians did seek and enjoy the "support and endorsement of others" to ensure their identity: the Church

community itself reaffirmed and maintained their group identity as the Children of God, the members of One Body in Christ (see Chapter 9).

This social function of adoption is also why Christianity, like many other cults of the day, incorporated a ceremony and ideology of "rebirth" (through ritual baptism). Just as you are born into a clan, race, geography, culture, or social rank, so you could be *re*born into a *new* social group, a new "family." Hence all Christians are "adopted" by God and thence called "brothers." This ceremony and ideology was so crucial to Christianity's success precisely because it was the only way to make the transition into a new social group acceptable to a collectivist society. That's why other cults employed similar ideas (see Chapter 16).

Holding's other favorite scholar, David DeSilva, agrees with Malina on all these points (emphasis added): "intense in-group reinforcement and mutual commitment makes the verdict of the group, *not the verdict of society*, the one of ultimate importance for the individual," which is why the kinship structure of the Christian Church was "such that perseverance with the group remains an attractive option *even when the pressure to defect is high*."[312] And "affirming one another's worth as God's children" served to counter "the power of society's resistance with mutual support, encouragement, and affirmation."[313] In fact, DeSilva documents all the ways Christians coped with the external pressures Holding refers to (though exaggerates), yet *none* involve appeals to the strength of their evidence. According to DeSilva, they appealed to evidence of their group's moral superiority, *not* evidence of empirical or historical facts: Christians were more just, more compassionate, more selfless, more loyal, more brotherly, and *therefore* more godly, which entailed that whatever they heard from God must indeed have come from God.[314] DeSilva never mentions any empirical evidence for the resurrection or miracles of Jesus as playing *any* role in Christianity's success.

And that's the bottom line. As long as the groups to which you already belonged, and their leaders, were failing to practice what they preached, failing to realize social harmony and justice, the attraction of entering a group that *wasn't* failing would be strong. And this is why people sought to enter into new social groups in the Roman period, whether military, political, social, geographic, economic, or religious—in a quest to gain those things all human beings want: love, admiration, justice, economic security. That very same quest could lead them to

Christianity just as easily, and for all the same reasons—especially if their desperation or deprivation were great.

Finally, Christianity conformed to the social expectations of its day not only by offering converts an improvement in their most essential source of identity—a new and better family (just as many Romans longed for adoption into families of higher rank)—but also an improvement in their "place of origin," for they became not only "brothers" but also "citizens of Heaven" (Philemon 3:20), which was the best citizenship you could have. Every other city and kingdom was corrupt and dysfunctional, yet countless people sought to acquire one or another citizenship and thus to enter into a new social group that would give them a sense of identity, as well as help meet (many hoped) their most basic human needs. The exact same motivation would serve Christianity, too: for not only was its citizenship a better deal (since it lasted forever and was open to anyone and completely free), but in the living Christian brotherhood such a citizenship more obviously met those basic human needs that many were not finding satisfied by any of the worldly alternatives. And *then* the Christian "citizenship in Heaven" promised to meet those needs to perfection in the coming afterlife as well. This was not a novel idea. Philo says those who joined the Therapeutai, a particular Jewish sect that was very similar to Christianity, also became "citizens of Heaven and the Cosmos," while for any Jews the true "home and country" of the saved is "the most pure substance of Heaven," as we are mere tourists on Earth.[315]

And as expected, this superior kinship and political in-group affiliation that Christianity offered not only supplied the necessary moral guidance, but tied everyone to a common fate: a future life, when any remaining imperfections in Christianity's present realization of the Kingdom of God would be removed and the society purified and perfected by divine justice. In that sense, Heaven or Hell, eternal life or destruction, were *not* fates faced individually, but collectively. Those who were unjust or rejected the message of perfect justice, and were therefore "outside" the group or unfaithful to it, collectively met their deserved end: destruction. But those who entered and remained faithful to the group would inherit the true Kingdom of God when it finally arrived. This added a dire element of urgency to the Christian message: your decision to enter the group or not would decide your fate once and for all, and in the most spectacular way, by determining which group you would belong to in the end, and hence

which group's fate you would share. The idea certainly appealed to individual interests (as Malina and Neyrey point out, those in a collectivist society still have such interests—they just don't express them to the group), and thus it retained the same motivating power it has today. But the Christian gospel framed this appeal in collectivist terms as well: as what was fated and appropriate for each entire group, the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the chaff. Hence to threaten someone with ultimate divine destruction was literally to accuse them of membership in a dysfunctional group.

Malina and Neyrey on the Role of Revelation

After Malina and Neyrey establish the point Holding wants to emphasize (though misuses), namely that groupthink limits what people would consider acceptable and when, they go on to observe that "deviations from such general orientations readily stand out" and "this is especially notable in the case of the prophet in collectivist cultures" (POP 216), a point Holding fails to mention. In fact, Malina and Neyrey say, all the "prophets" of both the Jewish and Christian tradition "seem to be speaking their individual minds regardless of consequences to their groups or to themselves," thus going against the collectivist expectation of saying only what maintains harmony. Instead, they upset the social order by criticizing it. Though this may be why they were often persecuted, it remains a fact that such prophets were nevertheless widely *revered*—indeed they were often granted the highest status in any scale of reverence. Malina and Neyrey explain this by pointing out that the prophet is driven to this extreme by failures in the social system which can no longer be tolerated. He then succeeds in being heard, they argue, by placing his individual opinion within the collectivist expectation by *attributing it to divine inspiration*.

This is why they have to claim to be *prophets*, supernatural transmitters of the Word of God—who rules over, embodies, and represents the community—rather than individual men with their own good ideas arguing from objective evidence and reason. Because they can't do the latter and get away with it. No one would listen. According to Malina and Neyrey's analysis, to assert that your ideas come direct from God is the *only* successful way within a Western collectivist society to object openly to failures in the social system, and thus effect change. That's why we do not see individual visionaries *arguing* for change, ever—in Jewish history or even pagan history—except in the unusual, and thus much-distrusted (and therefore ultimately unsuccessful) context of the elite rationalist subculture of the philosophical schools. Instead, in Western collectivist societies, all popular movements for change or reform are attributed to *revelations from God*.

In other words, following this and what we mentioned earlier, according to Malina and Neyrey: **(1)** To claim a revelation from God was the only way to have any actual impact on society, since it was the only way to contextualize your ideas that your fellow collectivists would be attuned to accept, and **(2)** it is typical in collectivist cultures to see no wrong in *lying* to the group in order to tell them what they want and need to hear. In fact, according to Malina and Neyrey, this kind of "deception" was practically obligatory. From those two facts comes the conclusion that most (if not all) "revelations" or "visions" from God could be pious fabrications, a culturally necessary expedient in order to reform collectivist-minded societies that are experiencing structural failures in their social system. An excellent case for the same conclusion has been made by Evan Fales, who also suggests even genuine ecstatic states could have neuro-physiological causes manifesting subconscious needs in the very same way (though Fales himself is agnostic as to whether mystics actually have such ecstatic states, as opposed to merely claiming to have had them).[316]

So this can manifest as a deliberate or an accidental causal relationship: the need to couch reformative ideas in prophetic context (combined with the acceptability of saying what the group wants to hear even if it isn't the truth) can cause the prophet to *claim* to have had a communication from God; but it could also cause him to *experience* a communication from God, through dreams, hallucinations, or an ecstatic or altered state of consciousness. In the one case there is a conscious rationale, a conscious lie for the greater good (which, according to Malina and Neyrey, a collectivist community might not even consider a lie). In the other case, cultural presuppositions subconsciously guide the prophet's mind to experience exactly what he needs to in order to achieve his goals. Such "experiences are found among 90 percent of the world's population today, where they are considered normal and natural, even if not available to all individuals," whereas "modern Euro-American cultures offer strong cultural resistance" to such "experiences, considering them pathological or infantile while considering *their* mode of consciousness as normal and ordinary." So moderns like Holding stubbornly reject such a possibility only by ignoring the difference between modern and ancient cultures—for contrary to modern hostility to the idea, "to meet and converse with a god or some other celestial being is a phenomenon which was simply not very surprising or unheard of in the Greco-Roman period," and the biology and

sociology of altered states of consciousness is sufficient to explain this.[317] Indeed, Malina explains all the post-mortem appearances of Jesus in terms of such altered states of consciousness, i.e. as naturally-induced visions.[318] Malina personally confirmed to me that he does not believe there was any other "evidence" of the resurrection other than such visions.[319]

As it happens, schizotypal personalities (who experience a relatively common form of nondebilitating schizophrenia) would be the most prone to hallucinations guided by such a subconscious mechanism, and therefore the most likely to gravitate into the role of "prophet" in their society (as Malina himself argues). Paul, for example, so often refers to hearing voices in his letters (often quoting God's voice verbatim) that it's quite possible he was just such a person, and so might many of the original Christian leaders have been (like Peter). Indeed, the "Angel of Satan" that Paul calls a "thorn in his flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:6-10) could have been an evil voice he often heard and had to suppress (though Holding is right to point out that other interpretations are possible). But there are many opportunities even for normal people to enter the same kind of hallucinatory state, especially in religious and vision-oriented cultures: from fasting, fatigue, sleep deprivation, and other ascetic behaviors (such as extended periods of mantric prayer), to ordinary dreaming and hypnagogic or hypnopompic events (a common hallucinatory state experienced by normal people between waking and sleep).[320]

It's certainly impossible to rule out pious fabrication in the case of visions resolving internal disputes, driving doctrinal developments and schisms within the Church. But wouldn't visions responsible for conversion be another story? Not necessarily. Just as the early Russian Marxists endured incredible suffering and gave their lives by the hundreds of thousands, knowing full well their only personal reward was eternal oblivion, all for the sole benefit of advancing history toward a utopian state in the distant future of mankind that they would never experience, a Christian missionary could have been willing to bear all and give all for the chance to advance society toward the same result, and (like the Marxists) for no greater reward than that. In other words, anyone who believed the moral and social vision of Christianity was *in itself* worthwhile would probably be willing to suffer and die for that alone, and therefore might be willing to fabricate any pious deception they thought would succeed, if it would help organize people toward that desired future state. In fact, groupthink

makes this highly probable, since to sacrifice yourself, and your own interests, for the communal good is then *expected*.

Of course, we can't prove this in any given case. But we can't refute it either. The terrible problem Holding faces is that, if he really wants to follow the Malina & Neyrey thesis, then we have no reason to expect Paul or any other Christian witness to tell us the truth about this: for in a collectivist culture like his, "people are expected to tell others in the in-group what they believe those others want to hear, rather than what they really think" (POP 213) and "individuals are enculturated not to express what they personally think but to say what their ... audience needs or wants to hear from their in-group." So "saying the right thing to maintain harmony is far more important than telling what seems to be the truth to the private self" (POP 214). Only "individualists value being objective in speech," whereas collectivists hold that the communal good is "far more important than 'telling the truth'" (POP 215). In other words, when Paul says he saw Jesus, we can't necessarily take him at his word—because he may merely be speaking in the language his audience expects of him, telling them what they want and need to hear.

Lack of Evidence for Holding's View

In this and many other respects, Holding goes against what Bruce Malina actually argues. Holding claims "changes in persons (such as Paul's conversion) were abnormal," but Malina and Neyrey never quite say this, and Holding presents no evidence in support of it. Maybe Holding can quibble about what "abnormal" means—certainly, stand-out people who move social changes are rare even in individualistic societies. Most people follow. Only a few lead. That is a universal truth of human nature. But changing social position or group affiliation, and thus (by Malina and Neyrey's thesis) changing identity, was relatively *common* in antiquity. It was especially visible in the act of joining a philosophical school or mystery cult or burial club, in a Gentile becoming a nominal or practicing Jew, in a Jew aligning himself with one particular sect over all others, and in numerous examples of social mobility within the Roman political and military system, including adoption or manumission, and the acquisition of citizenship. Even by marrying, a woman entered a new social group, and by migrating (from one region to another, or from country to city), a man entered a new social group. The widely visible process of Hellenization and Romanization itself exemplifies switching from one cultural group to another, which entailed changing language, dress, customs, and values. And affiliating with a new group, in all these cases, entailed changing or altering one's identity according to Malina and Neyrey. So "changes in persons" were *normal*, not abnormal. Even the specific idea of religious "conversion" was a known phenomenon of the time, and though not typical, neither was it rare.[321]

Likewise, though Holding claims "the erasure or blurring of these various distinctions ... would have made Christianity seem radical and offensive," where is the evidence of such an objection being voiced by *any* critic of the movement? If the "the erasure or blurring" of social distinctions was so offensive, why does no one mention it among their objections to Christianity? Why do Christians never defend themselves against such a charge? This makes no sense. Unless there was no such charge—and therefore, no such offense (not least because Christians didn't in fact call

for the erasure or blurring of social distinctions *outside their own group*, and by the end of the 2nd century they'd abandoned this program even *within* their group).

There were certainly snobs who looked down on the pretensions of lower-class, poorly-educated Christians, or those who took great offense at Christians accusing them of vanity, immorality, and ignorance, and attacking their elite culture as corrupt. And critics did find a lot about the Christian message that seemed ridiculous to them. But by and large, the known objections fell into two categories: those based on incorrect beliefs about what the Christians actually did or taught, and those based on the insufficiency of the evidence. "You're *actual* social values will destroy society" never comes up as an argument. So Holding's claim that it must have is unfounded.[322] Instead, early Christian apologists like Athenagoras or Justin Martyr assume even the Roman Emperor would approve of *actual* Christian values, and hence rarely think it necessary to defend them.[323] Only once does Celsus use an argument that Christianity would be bad for society if universally adopted, but not because of its aims of social equality, but only because their pacifism would prevent them from winning wars! Even then, Origen responds that Celsus has misunderstood Christian teaching.[324] Hence critics did argue that what they *mistook* as Christian values would destroy society, but that evinces ignorance, not hostility to the *actual* Christian message—and obviously only those who correctly understood that message, and liked it, converted. As far as our evidence can show, those who rejected Christianity did so either because they didn't really understand it, or there wasn't enough evidence to convince them—which certainly refutes any notion of the evidence being "irrefutable."

Bruce Malina argues the exact *opposite* of Holding here. Malina's entire case for the origin and success of the Christian movement rests on his well-proven conclusion that the Christian message was *not* offensive but *attractive*—to those who converted.[325] Once again, that it was offensive to its *enemies* tells us nothing about how it was perceived by those who eventually did convert. And again, consider the Essenes: according to Holding's argument, the Christian message of social equality would have been too offensive to win converts, yet the Essene sect continually found converts by preaching that very same message. How could that be? Malina provides the answer. In fact, my analysis throughout this book is based on

many of the same ideas articulated by Malina—which only goes to show that Holding has not made an adequate effort to understand him.

For example, Holding brings up the question of slaves and paupers (and we should include all others who were experiencing some disquieting state of deprivation, regardless of wealth or status), claiming—again directly contrary to Malina—that "even from a Western perspective, joining the group did not do anything to alleviate their condition in practical terms." It's hard to fathom how Holding can say this. For it gave them *exactly* what they wanted: brotherhood, equality, and salvation—in other words: happiness. True, Christianity didn't free slaves, but it gave them love, companionship, support, and hope, as well as a place where they could belong *and be treated as equals*, thus alleviating the misery they otherwise had to still endure—which, of course, became all the easier to endure because it was only temporary, 'for soon they would enjoy paradise'. And so, too, for everyone else whose particular miseries could not be eliminated: for those miseries were nevertheless compensated by benefits they could find nowhere else—imperfectly in the present, but completely in a promised future. And still for many, their miseries *were* alleviated by the Christian community: paupers could eat, and bury their dead at no charge, and never wanted for shelter or good company; the sick and disturbed found a hope that healed or soothed them; even some of the rich could find escape from a system that had turned against them, or flee the otherwise inescapable miseries of the rat race by retreating into a quiet and simple life of contemplation—as had many a philosopher before them (on all this, see again Chapter 5).

Thus, when Holding argues that "shattering these social distinctions would have been a faux pas of the greatest order—unless you had some powerful cards to play," the fact is: granting greater real-world and future-world happiness, and an escape from present miseries and future doom, *was* a powerful card. It was powerful enough to persuade thousands among the downtrodden and weary (who *far* outnumbered the successful and content), thus accounting for the actual rate of Christian expansion. But Holding is entirely incorrect when he argues that "it would also not have occurred to such persons as a whole that their situation could be changed, since all that happened was attributed to fate, fortune, or providence." That's entirely the opposite of what Malina and Neyrey argue. For changing one's situation for the better was exactly what fate, fortune, and

providence were *expected* to do. Indeed, if Holding's claim here were true, why did people seek to improve their social status at all? Once again, why did slaves seek to become freedmen, and their sons to become magistrates? Why did people move to new territories or towns, much less seek the citizenship? Why did soldiers seek to become centurions, or even join the army in the first place? Why did merchants seek to prosper or win greater honors? Why did Celts Romanize themselves? Or Jews Hellenize themselves? Why did anyone join any philosophical school? Why the flow of converts to the Essenes? Or to the Cynics? Or from paganism to Judaism? Why the interest in salvation cults, whereby converts also changed their situation for the better in the afterlife?

Holding's argument simply makes no sense at all of any of this behavior—yet this behavior was ubiquitous. Malina explains this perfectly. If only Holding would pay attention—or simply think things through himself. For how could someone deny that their misery in the present life would be alleviated by joining a Christian brotherhood, when the evidence of miserable people improving the quality of their lives by joining that brotherhood was plain to see? Holding's entire case depends on the assumption that even collectivists could be persuaded by irrefutable evidence, yet here was irrefutable evidence, right before their very eyes. Therefore, Holding's own assumptions refute him. And while thousands upon thousands were continually joining salvation cults, creating new social group identities through rebirthing and initiation ceremonies—all for the security of the mere *assurance* that their present miseries were but temporary and would eventually be alleviated for all eternity—why would Christianity be any less popular or successful for offering *exactly the same thing*? Indeed, even more: for unlike most other such cults, Christianity offered "a sample of the goods," a glimpse of the good life they would receive in the future world, by realizing that vision in Christian practice.

Holding attempts to argue that "it is an anachronism of Western individualism to suppose that a slave or the poor would have found Christianity's message appealing" on the basis of its "erasure" of social distinctions. But once again, this is *exactly the opposite* of what Malina and Neyrey argue. As explained earlier, their argument is that a slave or pauper would not *claim* to find Christianity's message appealing for this reason, but would instead claim (regardless of their actual motives) that their alignment with the Christian group was good for the society as a

whole, and that it was necessary to escape a failing social system in which harmony and communal good were forgotten or poorly realized, and to enter instead into a group that was setting things *right*. The Christian would not see himself (or at least would never portray himself) as rebelling against existing social values (though *we* can understand him in that way), but as *reasserting* those very social values, truly realizing them, which the wider society was failing to do. In other words, the Christian would not claim he was abandoning one set of values for another, but that the wider society had already abandoned its own values, by succumbing to individualistic greeds and lusts, and therefore it was necessary to join the Christian community in order to reestablish those core values.

That's why Christianity was never really sold as "new" (as we saw in Chapter 4), but as a restoration of what were the original and proper social values intended by God. And that was key: Holding is correct that there would not have been any successful mass movement based on an argument from *reason* that certain values were proper and should be realized—which is why philosophy was unsuccessful as a social movement for the reform of society. A mass movement for social reform could only appeal to a collectivist mindset by attributing the idea to a universal God, who by that status alone was the supreme master over all, and therefore the supreme representative of the group. In such a way the Christian avoided making any sort of individualistic, idealistic claim to progress, and instead contextualized his movement as coming from a universal lord, and therefore collectivistically appropriate for all to obey. This is exactly what Malina and Neyrey argue. Holding apparently skipped that part.

Finally, Holding tries to claim there would be a double-whammy for Jewish converts, in that "strict observance of the Torah became Judaism's own 'defense mechanism' against Roman prejudices, their way of staying pure of outside influences," yet Holding admits that in "the era of Antiochus ... Jews often capitulated to Hellenism," as in fact did Hellenized Diaspora Jews even in the time of Christ. How can Holding account for that when his theory renders it impossible? And how can the abandonment of Torah relate to the ministry or resurrection of Jesus, when it came *after both*, and from private revelations, not from any flesh-and-blood Jesus? The fact is, Christ did nothing in life, or by rising from the dead, that gave support to the abandonment of Torah law. Therefore, Holding cannot bootstrap a case for the former by appealing to the latter.

For the *only* evidence supporting that innovation was a subjective vision, long after the resurrection, which no one can confirm or refute as coming from God, and which few today would regard as reliable evidence at all, much less “irrefutable” evidence.

Conclusion

In *The Social Gospel of Jesus* Bruce Malina argues that the Christian message made perfect sense in its time, to a great many people, and was not only inherently attractive—even to a collectivist society bound by groupthink—but was so skillfully presented as to be certain of success in that context regardless of the evidence. For its popularity was due to its social message far more than anything we would call "evidence" that Jesus rose from the dead. The only evidence Malina ever even considers relevant to Christianity's success is the experiences certain missionaries had through altered states of consciousness. Apart from their own healings and exorcisms, nary a miracle ever enters his analysis, much less the miracle of the resurrection itself, beyond its being spiritually "witnessed" by prophets, both ancient and contemporary. It's unacceptable for Holding to use only those points of Malina's analysis that suit him, and ignore the others that count against him.

Instead, Holding's distorted version of the Malina-Neyrey thesis makes a useless caricature of their theory, one that utterly fails to explain the actual behavior of ancient Jews, Romans, and Greeks, and completely ignores what Malina and Neyrey themselves say about the causes of Christianity's development and success. In actual fact, they argue that Christianity conformed perfectly to the collectivist expectations of its time and society and was successful for that very reason. The need to manipulate groupthink was precisely why Christianity came to be presented as it was: as a revealed command from God Almighty, rather than a rational or empirical argument for practical action. Whether consciously or subconsciously motivated, they argue, appealing to visions and communications from God (which included scripture, as his revealed word) was the only way Christianity *could* succeed in its environment.

Ultimately, Holding has presented no evidence confirming his own conclusion over what Malina actually argues. And what evidence we do have certainly appears to contradict Holding and support Malina. Therefore, groupthink would have presented no barrier to Christian growth. To the contrary, it would have enhanced that growth, in exactly the

same degree, and for exactly the same reason, that it *impeded* the growth of rational philosophy among the wider population of the time. Supporting this argument is the fact that early Christians repudiated the core values of rational philosophy (including its dependency on objective evidence and reason) and lauded quite a different path to discovering truth (as we shall demonstrate in Chapter 17). Even Origen admitted that most among the people do not respond to rational argument and have no time for the analysis of evidence, but follow instead a simple faith in those prophets who claim revelations from God.[326]

11. Did No One Trust Women?

There Is No Evidence Women Were a Problem

James Holding argues that "if Christianity wanted to succeed, it should never have admitted that women were the first to discover the empty tomb or the first to see the Risen Jesus," nor should it have "admitted that women were main supporters" or "lead converts." But why should that be a problem? Holding claims it would be a "stigma" that Christianity would have to overcome. But he never makes any sense of this argument. There is no evidence Christians ever used any female testimony to promote the Gospel—as Holding himself admits when he cites 1 Corinthians 15: the only evidence Christians actually appealed to when winning converts was the eyewitness testimony of *men*. Therefore, there wouldn't have been any stigma to overcome, even if having women as witnesses would have presented one. Yet a closer look at the evidence reveals no support for Holding's contention that having women as witnesses was actually embarrassing, even if Christians *had* mentioned the fact when persuading others to convert.

To begin with, not only were the Gospels written long after Paul's day (hence after Christianity was already spread across the Empire), but in the first century (as far as we can tell) they were only available to mature converts. In that period there is no evidence anyone else heard of them or was able to read them, or that any specific content from them was used to convert anyone, beyond what is said by Paul in his letters, and the Christian missionaries in Acts, none of whom ever mention women in their sermons. Thus, already Holding cannot establish that there was a stigma to overcome, even if the involvement of women was a stigma. And once converted, no one would have left in disgust after hearing that women were involved. Holding presents no evidence anyone did. And in truth, the involvement of women in Christianity's history was no greater than in the history of Israel, from Mariam to Sarah to Ruth—and let's not forget the Prophets Deborah (Judges 4) or Huldah (2 Kings 22:12-20), or Rachel the Mother of All Israel (Genesis 29-35). Yet Jews did not abandon their faith in disgust, because women took such a prominent role in their

history, nor did Gentiles cease supporting or converting to Judaism at this news, either. So Holding's argument is a wash even from the start.

Secondly, women were a *major* target of the Christian mission. Several historians argue that "many more females than males were converting to Christianity in its first centuries," and recognize "Christianity's appeal to women as an important factor in its success." Indeed, "in the first Christian centuries the new belief system used women and their position in the family/household environment to transmit and reproduce itself"[327] (women could even hold the office of deacon within the Church).[328] This was allegedly true even before Jesus died—as Holding himself admits when he cites Luke 8:3 (and to that we could add numerous other examples: e.g. Mark 15:40-41)—but certainly after, as Holding again admits by citing Acts 16:14-15 (and again to that we could add numerous other examples: e.g. Acts 17:4, 17:12).

Holding's choice of Acts 16 is particularly apt, since it reveals a well-known truth about the early Church: it depended on the largesse and generosity of wealthy or revered female members. Paul openly admits this in Romans 16:1-12, and in 1 Corinthians 16:19 and Colossians 4:15 Paul reveals that women of means were providing housing and meeting space for the Church. Would incorporating women into the story of the movement's creation *reduce* or *increase* conversion by such women? Obviously, if anything, the latter. Indeed, it would have been a matter of honor to appease these women who ventured their lives and property, deserving such prominent mention and praise from Paul, by placing women in the story *deliberately*, especially if the place they held was not important to establishing the truth of the Gospel itself and thus would do no harm. And that's exactly the place women take in the story: not a single item of the Gospel Paul preached depended on these women, and their role is consistently secondary and subservient. Christian women in the Gospels all behave exactly as women ought to in the eyes of the Mediterranean cultures of the time (or otherwise got what they deserved, as in Acts 5:1-11). And no stigma could ever result from depicting women behaving exactly as men expected them to!

Holding might insist that having women as prominent converts and members of the Church would be embarrassing. But why would that be? Women were prominent in numerous other cults of the day. A great many priesthoods, some holding considerable prestige, were open *only* to

women. Indeed, women were routinely *worshipped*: for there were numerous female deities who were widely revered. That caused no embarrassment. Nor did the admission of women into schools and philosophical sects—and by the Roman period, every major philosophical school admitted women, and we know the names of several prominent female philosophers. The Jews also held many women in respect, even in their own scriptures (as noted above), and as wealthy donors to synagogues, while some sects admitted women into worship exactly as the Christians did.[329] Even though many bigots certainly had a problem with this, there is no evidence any actual convert to Christianity had a problem with it, especially since men still controlled the Church, women in the Church still behaved as they were expected to, and no element of the Gospel "by which all are saved" (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8) depended on the testimony of women.

The Testimony of Women *Was* Trusted

Nevertheless, Holding argues that "a woman's place was in the home, not the witness stand," but that has no relevance to his argument. Just because it was unseemly for a woman to appear in court does not mean her testimony wasn't trusted. Confusing the two is a popular error made by many Christian apologists. In actual fact, the evidence proves quite the opposite of Holding's assumption that "women were regarded as 'bad witnesses' in the ancient world." The evidence does not support such a blanket distrust of female testimony, but shows instead that female testimony was often trusted, even in a court of law.

Of course, it's already improper to argue from courtroom decorum to everyday credibility. The Gospels are not court documents. They are, at best (and arguably only in the case of Luke), histories. Not the same thing. And when it came to this context, of using women as sources for historical claims, there is no evidence of distrust—any more for women than for men of comparable status or condition. For example, an oft-cited passage from Origen does *not* show the critic Celsus objecting to Mary's testimony because she was a *woman*, but because she was insane, hence Celsus dismisses the testimony of the *men* (Thomas and Peter) on exactly the same grounds.[330] Josephus, by contrast, claims to have his entire account of the heroic sacrifices at Gamala and Masada from no other source than two women in each case—yet shows no embarrassment at this. Josephus often forgets to tell us who his sources were for a particular story, yet here he goes out of his way to report his only sources were women. That makes no sense, unless Josephus regarded his sources as quite respectable, and therefore actually *worth* mentioning, which is quite the opposite of a woman's testimony being an embarrassment.[331] Josephus even lists their qualifications the same way he would for a male witness: the witnesses at Gamala were the granddaughters of an eminent man, and of the witnesses at Masada one was an elder and the other was famously sensible and well-educated with respectable connections (the fact that some scholars now think Josephus actually made all this up only reinforces the point, since that would entail he saw nothing wrong with even *inventing* female

witnesses to such important events).[332] Of course, as an elitist himself, Josephus might have scoffed at the testimony of humble women, just as he would that of humble men, but such elite snobbery was more widely disdained than emulated (as we shall see in Chapter 12, and have already seen in Chapter 2).

Otherwise, even the Gospel of John attests to how readily the testimony of a woman could be accepted: "many of the Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the account given by the woman who testified" to his psychic powers (John 4:39). That's probably fiction, but it would have to be believable fiction, and in any case dismissing a canonical Gospel as mere fiction is not an option for a conservative like Holding. Of course, when a pretentious bigot harrumphed at such a thing, he could always invent male testimony to replace a woman's, exactly as later Christians did. John 20 and Luke 23-24 both add multiple male witnesses to the empty tomb, a fact not attested by Mark or Matthew. But it was only when the resurrection dogma changed into a rising of the flesh (see Chapter 3) that the empty tomb became an important piece of evidence anyway, and thus it's only then that male corroboration starts to appear. Even so, when Luke (and Luke alone) has the men doubt the women because what they said sounded "silly," we can't just assume this was because they were women, rather than because their story was in itself incredible—if men had reported it, they may have been thought just as silly. But since none of this is in Mark or Matthew, Luke is probably contriving here. At best, he's appealing to elite skeptical values (or snobbery) by inventing the kind of evidence they expected. There was no need of this kind of evidence to persuade the masses (as we saw in Chapter 7 and will see again in Chapter 13, and below).

Finally, since there was (then as now) a lower standard for history than for law, the fact that a woman's testimony was accepted even in law refutes Holding's argument *a fortiori*. Holding quotes Malina and Neyrey, who claim that "In general Greek and Roman courts excluded as witnesses women, slaves, and children," and "according to Josephus" women "are unacceptable because of the 'levity and temerity of their sex'."[333] But Malina and Neyrey made a serious mistake here—which in turn betrays the fact that Holding is ill-qualified to assess the value of his sources for ancient history. In support of their claim, not only do they cite scholarship

that is literally a hundred years old (!), but their sources aren't even relevant.

Two of their three sources pertain only to Classical Athens—whose conclusions therefore do not apply even to the Hellenistic, much less the Roman era. More recent scholarship has established that although Athenian society considered it unseemly for a woman to appear in court, women could and often did testify through a male proxy, and such testimony was taken under oath outside of court and considered as valid as any man's.[334] As we'll see, this reflects the same sentiments found even in the more liberal Hellenistic and Roman periods: there was no widespread distrust of women, merely a chauvinistic expectation that proper women do not appear in public, least of all in a distinctly male domain (like a court of law), a consideration wholly irrelevant to the story in Mark's gospel. Meanwhile their third source, which at least discusses almost the right period, doesn't prove what Malina and Neyrey claim, but something quite different—that, again, it only was unseemly to compel a respectable woman to appear in court, or to let a woman act as a lawyer. Instead, the very same evidence (in their own cited source) actually proves a woman's testimony *was* sought in court and *was* as valid as any man's, and that in fact many women *did* engage themselves as lawyers, and even won their cases![335]

For example, in his trial against Verres, Cicero calls several women as witnesses, and shames Verres for having forced him to compel respectable women to appear in court to testify against him.[336] His objection is clearly against disturbing women of station, and the shock of women appearing and speaking in public in a traditionally male venue, *not* against trusting a woman's testimony—to the contrary, Cicero certainly trusts them, that's why he's calling them to testify! We even have actual court documents from the time of Jesus and Paul that include summaries of female testimony given at trial. For example, a papyrus from 49 A.D., copied from an official government archive, shows that a woman's testimony was entered into the court record, a sworn affidavit with her signature was accepted, and a ruling was made that relied on both, while a papyrus from 10 B.C. shows a woman was able to testify in a suit for divorce against her own husband, on a charge of wife-beating and squandering her dowry.[337] Actual examples aside, Roman law was quite explicit in permitting women

to swear oaths and testify in court, declaring in no uncertain terms that "women have the right to give evidence at trial."[338]

In fact, women could even *represent* themselves at trial, and until the time of Christ could advocate on behalf of others as well. Valerius Maximus lists several famous cases where women took others to trial, spoke in court, stood as witnesses, and won—indeed, he titles an entire chapter of his book: "Women Who Conducted Their Own Cases before Magistrates on Their Own Behalf or Others."[339] This was regarded as scandalous, of course, necessitating the standardized Praetorian Edict (issued every year) to include a prohibition against women representing others in court (beginning sometime in the first century A.D.)—yet even this expressly allowed women to continue representing themselves, as defendants or (in most civil and even some criminal cases) even as prosecutors.[340] The law only prevented women from directly bringing *criminal* cases to court, and even then it lists several exceptions, and unlike today, many crimes (like theft) produced civil rather than criminal charges anyway, which women thus *could* prosecute (and obviously testify for), even under the more restrictive law.[341]

So the claim that women could not testify in Greco-Roman courts is completely false. In every instance, the situation is clear: what men objected to was women taking the role of men in traditionally male spheres, not women being trusted as witnesses. That's why the prohibition created in the 1st century (which did not become permanent for yet another hundred years) only sought to ban women from acting as lawyers, but not women testifying in court, or even defending themselves or prosecuting their own cases. And that's why Cicero regards it as shameful to have to summon proper ladies from the quiet of their homes to make his case, but not to have women giving evidence, or trusting what they say. So it was at least mildly shocking for a woman to speak in public, or appear in court. But that had nothing to do with whether she was believed when she did.

Even the one exception proves the rule: women were not qualified to be witnesses to a *will* under Roman Law, but not because they weren't trusted—rather, because under the law you could not be a witness to a legal action that you were not yourself qualified to undertake. Since a woman could not attest her own will, she could not attest anyone else's will. But even this was not set in stone. Augustus established criteria by which a

woman could gain legal emancipation, and be free of any guardian. Since emancipated women could then make their own wills, they probably could have testified to the wills of others, too.[342] Moreover, a woman's incapacity to write her own will had nothing to do with her incompetence as an eyewitness, but with the perception that a woman was subject to bad judgment in making decisions. Once again these are different things.

So we must distinguish not only between objections to a woman's reliability as a witness, and objections to a woman appearing in a courtroom, but also between trusting a woman to testify to what she has *seen*, and trusting a woman to use good judgment in deciding what to believe from *hearsay or persuasion*. These are also not the same thing. Hence evidence of scoffing at the latter (which one can certainly find in antiquity) cannot be used as evidence of scoffing at the former. Yet the standard Roman manual on legal principles and procedures dispels even that judgment:

> That which is commonly believed, namely that women are very liable to be deceived owing to their instability of judgment and that therefore in fairness they should be governed by the authority of guardians, seems more specious than true.[343]

Gaius then catalogues evidence that women were perfectly competent, and could even sue their own legal guardians. Even so, we can find many attacks on women as gullible dupes. But gender by itself never comes up as grounds for distrusting what a woman says she *saw*.

So much for the Gentile perception of women as witnesses. What about the Jews? Palestinian Jews were certainly more hostile to women than their more enlightened Gentile peers, but Hellenized Jews are another story—and even in Palestine, the snobbery of the Pharisees found plenty of opposition from other sects, and the masses. So caution is in order when drawing conclusions from Pharisaic law—since by the time the Gospels were written Christianity had banked its popularity on *opposing* that very law. By then (if not already) Christians were preaching to those who thought this very law, which exceeded the Torah by adding the opinions of men to the commands of God, was the problem, not the solution, and therefore it didn't matter if Christianity included elements in its stories that the more snobbish of Pharisees would have objected to. To the

contrary, thumbing their noses at the corrupt Pharisees and their oppressive laws was exactly the Christian strategy for winning recruits from like-minded Jews among the disgruntled masses.[344]

Nevertheless, even the Pharisees did not regard the testimony of women as inherently untrustworthy—to the contrary, even under their law a woman's testimony could carry the same force as a man's. Rather, just as for the Romans, it was courtroom propriety most Jews were concerned with. All statements against women *appearing* in court were based on perceptions of how a woman ought to behave, and on the need to separate male and female social spheres—it was not based on disdain for their competence to testify. In fact, Torah Law contains no prohibition against women even appearing in court (and most Jewish sects rejected all law but Torah), while Mishnah Law specifically did *not* include women in its list of those unqualified to testify.[345] Even under Talmudic interpretation, scholars conclude "women are admitted as competent witnesses in matters within their particular knowledge," especially "for purposes of identification" and "in matters outside the realm of strict law."[346] In fact, since we find no blanket distrust of female testimony in pre-Talmudic legal sources, what we find in the much-later Talmudic record may not have been common in the 1st century anyway.

Thus historian Judith Wegner finds exactly the opposite of what Holding claims. Just as in Roman law, "the Mishnah's framers grant women the right to bring and defend a lawsuit," and "the sages acknowledge both a woman's mental competence and the reliance to be placed on her oath and testimony." Their "assessment of a woman's ability to give a truthful and accurate account reflects their recognition that her mental and moral capacities resemble those of a man." Though, as for Romans and Greeks, it was unseemly for a woman to appear and speak in public, her testimony could be delivered by a male representative. That is why "the list of intrinsically incompetent witnesses makes no mention of women," and there are many cases on record where the testimony of women was accepted, even under oath.[347] Rather, most objections to a woman testifying were based on principles of modesty, not a lack of trust. As the Talmud puts it, some Rabbis held that "a man should not mind the indignity of his wife appearing in court," while others held that "a man is averse to subjecting his wife to the indignity of appearing in court."[348] Obviously, this debate only makes sense if it was legal for a woman to

appear in court. Even the lengthy Talmudic lists and discussions of disqualified witnesses never mention women, except a single "anonymous" opinion that opposed allowing women to testify in capital cases (perhaps opposing their testimony in other cases, too, though none are specified).[349] That may have been because this gave women an unacceptable power over men (since her testimony could then condemn a man to death) or gave her a male role in society (if condemning someone to death was seen as a man's job). At any rate, the Talmud does not say what the reason was, much less that it was because a woman couldn't be trusted. And this lone opinion was clearly not normative anyway.

In actual fact, the Rabbis disputed such things as whether a single woman's testimony was enough in certain cases—since usually the testimony of even two *men* was required—but even here the Rabbis were evenly split: some said a single woman's testimony in certain circumstances was trusted, while some said she needed a second witness (man or woman) to corroborate her account, as would be expected even of a man.[350] Clearly such a debate makes no sense unless the testimony of women was otherwise allowed in court under the same rules as men's. In a similar vein, the Talmud says:

> Wherever the Torah accepts the testimony of one witness, it follows the majority of per-sons, so that two women against one man is identical with two men against one man. But there are some who declare that wherever a competent witness came first, even a hundred women are regarded as equal to one witness ... but when it is a woman who came first, then two women against one man is like half-and-half.[351]

This does mean a woman's testimony was valued less than a man's, but only by *some*, and even then only when it contradicts a man's testimony (especially testimony already taken before any women came forward). Otherwise, even these more bigoted rabbis accepted a woman's testimony in all other respects, and apart from those few who took such a view, everyone else held a woman's testimony as equal to a man's, and even capable of refuting a man's testimony under the same rules applied to men. At least this was so for every case where the Torah allowed the testimony of a single witness, as would be sufficient in any case outside a

court of law—like testifying to finding a tomb empty, since this did not involve condemning someone who claimed not to be guilty of a crime (which was the obvious reason for requiring two witnesses, to outweigh the contrary testimony of the suspect who, as his own witness, denied the charges).

The only evidence that authors like N.T. Wright offer to the contrary fails to relate to the issue of trusting testimony in court, and this is a common problem with Christian apologists: they often don't check their sources, or the context, before proclaiming something that suits their agenda. Look at Wright's only evidence:

(1) Mishnah, *Shabuot* 4:1 only pertains to a special kind of oath established by Leviticus 5:1. For women can take every other kind of oath, even those taken at trial.[352] But in this one limited case, to take the "oath of testimony" is to swear that you know of no sin committed by a particular person—in order to fulfill the law that if you know of a sin they have committed and don't report it, you are guilty (like an accomplice after the fact).[353] Because of that law, party A can demand party B take an oath that party B has not violated Leviticus 5:1 with respect to party A, therefore this would be testimony that party A has not sinned (and party B then becomes liable if they conceal a sin they know party A committed). For whatever reason, you could not compel a woman to take such an oath.

This does not mean a woman's testimony to something she *did* see was not admissible, but that a woman could not swear to have *not* seen a particular person sin over a given period of time. Since "those who are not suitable" to bear witness in court are distinguished as a separate category of those disqualified from an "oath of testimony," clearly the reason women were exempt from the law had nothing to do with being unsuitable. More probably it had to do with the assumption that women (who ought to be good little girls and stay in the home and not gossip) could not be expected to have sufficient direct knowledge of their neighbor's affairs. Otherwise, in all other criminal matters the *Shabuot* says a woman's oaths and testimony are admissible. Indeed, in the Talmudic commentary on this law, the Rabbis ask "do only men and not women come to court?" as if it was surprising that women didn't also come to court, and the response is only that "it is not customary for a woman to go to court," not that they

did not or could not, nor anything to do with the value of their testimony.[354] As before, the objection was to propriety, not trustworthiness: the reason given for why women didn't 'usually' come to court was a quotation of Psalms 45:14, "all glorious is the king's daughter within." In other words, it was unseemly for a woman to leave the home and appear in court—but it was still legal. Hence the next section of the Talmud discusses a case where a woman appeared in court.[355]

(2) Mishnah, *Rosh Hashshanah* 1:8c says of various scofflaws that "all evidence that cannot be received from a woman cannot be received from" these scofflaws either, with regard to testifying that the new moon was seen, which implies (at the very least) that women were not qualified to testify to the moon being new (i.e. fully dark yet not in eclipse). Since witnessing the new moon called you to the duty of traveling to the Temple to report it, even to the point of violating the Sabbath if necessary, this entailed taking a public religious role (including remaining in the Temple for a whole day and sharing a communal meal with men), which all no doubt entailed a boldness that was unseemly for a woman.[356] At the same time, witnesses were interrogated on minute astronomical details, suggesting that significant technical knowledge was necessary for your testimony to count, knowledge a woman was not supposed to have, and certainly was not expected to have.[357]

This must be the law Holding had in mind when he declared: "Women were so untrustworthy that they were not even allowed to be witnesses to the rising of the moon as a sign of the beginning of festivals!" But this law in no way says the reason for disqualification was that women were untrustworthy, nor is the context just any rising of the moon, but a very technical observation of lunar phase (after all, when exactly is the moon officially "new"?), on which the most sacred fundamentals of Jewish society depend. And the law concerned not just any legal testimony, but a very particular religious duty that it would have been improper for a woman to undertake.

Since the evidence that women could testify in court on nontechnical matters is clear and unambiguous, the law regarding new moons has no relevance to the role women played as witnesses in early Christian tradition. In fact, nowhere does the Talmud ever say women were

disqualified because they weren't *trusted*. Even where the Talmud says women were sometimes disqualified as witnesses, it never says why—except in one case: there, the rabbis conclude that a woman's testimony is to be trusted when she actually saw what she testifies to, but is not to be trusted when she only inferred that something had happened, which fits the conclusion already noted above that, for many, a woman's *judgment* was inherently questionable, but not her honesty.[358]

(3) The Babylonian Talmud has two passages in the *Baba Kama* (88a and 114b) concerning an unusual case when a woman and a child testified to the origin of a swarm of bees. Rabbi Johanan ben Broka (early 2nd century A.D.) says their testimony was in fact trusted, and asks "Are, then, a woman and a minor qualified to be witnesses?" To which Rabbi Jehudah responds: "This case was when they ran after it, and the two in question had showed him the place where the swarm of bees was coming from, but they were not called as witnesses." The actual question, therefore, is not answered, but is dismissed as irrelevant, since the case in question was not a trial (and yet, notably, their testimony *was* trusted).

Wright and others take the context to imply, however, that a woman's testimony was not admitted in a court of law. But that does not follow. The question pertains to the testimony of two witnesses, one of whom is a minor, and comes from a specific case involving a woman and a boy. Since normally two witnesses are required in a court of law—even when they are men—Johanan is asking whether a child (normally disqualified) can count as a second witness, especially in conjunction with a woman (probably a relative, and the testimony of mutual relatives is sometimes not admitted). So nothing can be deduced from this as to any general legal standing of women as witnesses in a court of law. To the contrary, only a few sections earlier in the *Baba Kama* there is a discussion of what to do when a woman is summoned to court and does not appear (she is charged with contempt of court).

That exhausts all the evidence even N.T. Wright produces, yet clearly these passages do not establish any disqualification of female testimony in general or in any way relevant to early Christianity. And against these vague and irrelevant passages we have the clear and relevant passages from the Mishnah and Talmud proving women *were* qualified as

legal witnesses. Though there is evidence in the Talmud (and *only* the Talmud) that *some* Rabbis did not permit the testimony of women in a court of law in *some* cases, that same evidence proves that a woman's testimony was nevertheless often permitted and routinely trusted.

What about Malina and Neyrey's quotation of Josephus? In fact, that confirms everything I've been saying. When Josephus summarizes the law of testimony, he says two or more witnesses were always required to establish a fact at trial, and then says "there shall be no testimony of women, because of the levity and boldness of their gender." *Then* he says slaves should not be allowed to testify because *they* were likely to lie.[359] It's notable that this is not the reason he gives for excluding women, and therefore he does not mean women were untrustworthy. Unlike slaves, Josephus is saying that women should not appear in court simply because it was unseemly—essentially saying that women were liable to giggle or scold or otherwise violate the proper demeanor of the court. Therefore, even this passage from Josephus offers no support to the view that the testimony of women was not *trusted*. As we saw above, Josephus certainly trusted the testimony of women. And the Talmudic and Mishnaic evidence confirms their testimony was trusted in court as well, even as much as a man's—just as it confirms the view that women *appearing in a courtroom* was improper. But that is not the situation in the Gospels.

Why Mark Places Women at the Empty Tomb

Holding finally argues that "it would have been much easier to put the finding of the tomb on the male disciples," if there really was a discovery of an empty tomb. But as we've seen, there would not have been any great need to do this if the drama of the narrative made putting women in the scene more appropriate to the message intended by the author, and if this addition also increased its appeal to female converts. In other words, Holding's premise is false, if creating evidence of a historical fact is not what Mark was doing. And there is sufficient evidence to believe that, in fact, inventing a witness is *not* what Mark was doing. Subsequent authors (like Luke) may have believed they were reporting a historical fact, but I doubt Mark thought he was.

Of course, Holding's argument here requires the presumption that Christians were wanton liars who only told the truth when they couldn't get away with lying. But if we assume instead that Christians were honest, at best all his argument could achieve here is evidence that there was an empty tomb, which would still not establish that there was a resurrection.[360] But there is abundant evidence that Mark, who appears to have invented the appearance of women at the tomb (as all subsequent authors copy him verbatim, or exhibit awareness of his or their versions), was crafting a narrative of symbolic meaning rather than recording historical testimony. His empty tomb narrative, for instance, is constructed from passages in Psalms, Ezekiel, and 2 Chronicles, with allusions to the Jacob's Well narrative in Genesis, all in a way that produces powerful symbolic rather than historical meaning. I believe his narrative also deliberately parallels (and thus critiques and aims to replace) the burial liturgy of the Orphic mysteries.[361]

For these reasons we should first look for *literary* reasons Mark would place women at the tomb. And the first and foremost reason Mark obviously has women first at the tomb, and first to learn the truth, is to fulfill the very gospel itself, that "the least shall be first" (Mark 9:35 and 10:31). That's the whole *point*, not only of this particular narrative, but of the *entire gospel*. Mark had already declared from the outset that he is

writing a ‘gospel’, not a history (Mark 1:1). Notice how the parables of Jesus are *chock full* of this theme, of “reversing” the reader’s expectations.[362] And notice how Mark records with definite approval Christ’s mysterious program of concealing the truth behind parables:

> “The Mystery of the Kingdom of God is given to you, but to those who are outside everything is produced in parables, so that when they watch they may see but not know, and when they listen they may hear but not understand, for otherwise they might turn themselves around and be forgiven” ...
>
> And with many parables like these he told them the word as they were able to hear it, and he did not speak to them without a parable, but in private he explained everything to his own disciples.[363]

This is a clue to the reader: the truth is being concealed behind parables, and only explained to insiders, *in secret*. One may balk at the notion, but Holding cannot *prove* this is not what Mark was doing with his entire gospel. And since the central theme of the gospel was reversal of expectation, contrary to Holding’s assumption, having women first at the tomb is exactly what Mark *would* invent, to carry through the gospel message that the least shall be first.

In other words, the empty tomb story may well be a parable all in itself, whose meaning does not lie in whether it actually happened, but in what the narrative teaches you. What’s meant by a ‘parable’ here (a *parabolê*) is a “comparison” or “analogy” and thus is not the truth itself, but something that *points* to the truth, through a convenient and often symbolic fiction. Any narrative that conveys the truth only in its *structure* (and the social realities or scriptural passages it draws attention to through allusions and analogies), is thus a parable: the meaning is hidden and has to be figured out—or communicated in secret to those of sufficient rank—as Jesus himself is made to say (to his disciples and thus to us, the readers). To treat such a story as a historical narrative is to miss the very point of it. I discussed the idea of concealing the truth from outsiders this way in Chapter 10, and I shall provide sweeping evidence of this being the actual case throughout the Gospels in my forthcoming book *On the*

Historicity of Jesus Christ, but some examples have already been published by Randel Helms in *Gospel Fictions*.

We can see this even in the specific case of placing women at the tomb. That Mark is only deploying a literary device in reversing our expectation by having the women discover the empty tomb instead of the disciples (and thus having "the least be the first"), besides being obvious, is corroborated by the fact that Mark's gospel is full of similar and quite blatant reversals of expectation: the *pillars* James and John, who ask to sit at the right and left of Jesus in his glory (Mark 10:35-40), are replaced by two *thieves* who sit on his right and left at his crucifixion (Mark 15:27); Simon *Peter*, Christ's right-hand man who was told he had to "deny himself and take up his cross and follow" (Mark 8:34), denies *Jesus* and is replaced by Simon *of Cyrene* (a foreigner, the exact opposite of a disciple) when it comes time to truly bear that cross (Mark 14:66-72 and 15:21); instead of his *family* as would be expected, his *enemies* come to bury Jesus (Mark 15:43); even Pilate's expectation that Jesus should still be alive is confounded (Mark 15:44); and contrary to all expectation, Christ's own people, the Jews, mock their own savior (Mark 15:29-32), while it is a Gentile officer of Rome who recognizes his divinity (Mark 15:39).

So it's simply more of the same when Mark decides to say it was the male disciples who abandon Christ (Mark 14:50 and 14:66-72, vs. 14:31), while it was the 'least' among them, lowly women, who loyally attend his death and burial, who truly "followed him," and continue to seek him thereafter (Mark 15:40-41, 15:47, 16:1). Indeed, Mark ends his gospel with the mother of all reversals, with the women fleeing in *fear* and *silence*, and *not* delivering the good news (Mark 16:8), the exact opposite of the "good news" of the "voice crying out" of the "messenger who will prepare our way" with which Mark began his gospel (Mark 1:1-3). All of this sure looks like literary license to me. And that strongly implies the women in this story are a literary device. It's brilliant fiction—deeply meaningful, but fiction nonetheless.

So given Mark's narrative agenda, regardless of the actual facts, the tomb *has* to be empty, in order to confound the expectations of the reader, just as a foreign Simon *must* carry the cross instead of Simon Peter, a Gentile *must* acknowledge Christ's divinity instead of the Jews, a Sanhedrist *must* bury the body instead of Jesus' family, and women *must* be the first to hear the Good News. But there is *another* reason to suspect

the women are an invention here: their names. Salomê is the feminine of Solomon, an obvious symbol of supreme wisdom and kingship (as well as the builder of the Temple and purported author of the *Wisdom of Solomon*). Wisdom was often portrayed as a feminine being (Sophia), so to have her represented here behind a symbolic name rich with meaning is not unusual. Mariam (Mary) is the sister of Moses and Aaron who led the Hebrew women in song after their deliverance from Egypt, which represented the Land of the Dead in Jewish symbolism (just as crossing the wilderness into Palestine symbolized the process of salvation, escaping from death into Paradise).[364] Magdala is a variant Hellenization of the Hebrew for "tower," the same exact word transcribed as Magdôlon in the Septuagint—in other words the biblical Migdol, representing the borders of Egypt (and hence of Death). The Hebrews camp near Migdol to lure the Pharaoh's army to their doom in Exodus 13:1-4, after which "they passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness three days" (Numbers 33:7-8), just as Jesus had done, on their way to the "twelve springs and seventy palm trees" of Elim (33:9), just as we know the gospel would be spread by twelve disciples and (at least according to Luke 10:1-17) seventy missionaries. "Mariam the mother of Jacob" in Mark is an obvious reference to *the* Jacob, better known as (you might have guessed) *Israel*. So the two Marys represent Egypt and Israel, and (on the one side) the borders of the Promised Land and the miraculous defeat of death needed to get across, and (on the other side) the founding of a new nation, a New Israel—both linked as sisters of Moses (the first Savior) and Aaron (the first High Priest), and mediated by Wisdom (Salome), linked here as a symbol of supreme kingship and the building of the Temple and the recording of Wisdom (Solomon). Another clue that these women are symbolic is the fact that they don't exist in Mark's story *at all* except on three symbolically connected occasions: they attend the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus (though Salome is omitted from the burial: Mark 15:40, 15:47, 16:1). In Mark's Gospel we never hear of them until then, not once in the entire ministry of Jesus.

This seems a highly improbable coincidence, there being exactly three women, with exactly these names, appearing exactly three times, which evoke exactly those scriptures, and triangulate in exactly this way, to convey an incredibly convenient message about the Gospel and the status of Christ as Messiah and miraculous victor over the Land of the

Dead. What are the odds? Maybe you're not as impressed by all these coincidences as I am. But you don't have to agree with my analysis of the evident symbolism of these women. The only thing that matters is that this interpretation cannot be ruled out—there's no evidence against it, and some evidence for it (Mark expressly approves of concealing symbolic meanings behind narratives, and the names and events of this narrative fit the deeper meaning of the Gospel with surprising convenience). It therefore provides an available motive to invent a visit to the tomb by women, especially these particular women, which means we cannot assume the Christians would instead have invented a visit by men first. We cannot demonstrate that they would. For inventing a visit by women carried even more meaningful symbolism, and was even more in accordance with the Gospel message itself.

Conclusion

Holding has not demonstrated that the admission of women into the Church or its core traditions presented any obstacle to its actual scale of growth in its first hundred years, or beyond. His claim that women were widely devalued as witnesses is false. Both Gentiles and Jews trusted the testimony of women, both in and outside the courtroom. And his assumption that Christians would sooner have invented a male visit to the empty tomb is unjustified: such a place in the story had no bearing on the Gospel itself, every element of which was based on the testimony of men; the prominent and important role women played in the success of the Church, especially women of means and station, would have strongly urged including women in the story, especially when their role was not crucial and conformed perfectly to the expectations of their society; and Mark had strong and evident reasons to specifically place women and *not* men in his empty tomb story—which is the first anyone appears to have heard of an empty tomb, much less any role of women as witnesses to it, long after the Church had already spread throughout the Empire. Finally, there is no evidence Mark's gospel, or the story it contains, was ever used to win converts in the first hundred years, and no evidence either Mark or his story were widely known even within the Church itself in that period. So, too, even for Luke-Acts. Therefore, there is no sense in which having women in the Church or its founding myths would have presented any difficulty for the original Christian mission.

12. Did No One Trust Illiterate Laymen?

James Holding argues that “Peter and John were dismissed based on their social standing,” citing Acts 4:13, which “reflects a much larger point of view among the ancients,” of hostility to “country bumpkins.” But this is simply a repeat of Holding’s argument regarding “the problem of having Jesus hail from Galilee and Nazareth,” which we already addressed in Chapter 2. It certainly helps explain Christianity’s failure to recruit many elites. But it has nothing to do with Christianity’s success among *non*-elites, who did not share the same snobbish attitudes, but quite the contrary: disgusted by elite snobbery of just this sort, those among the oppressed would be even more receptive to a hopeful movement begun and run by their own. That’s what the Christian movement was all about:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, who has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, and sent me to mend the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and sight to the blind.[365]

This would have been obvious had Holding actually looked at the context of his own quotation from the Talmud. Regarding “commoners” (“people of the land”) the Talmud says:

> To marry the daughter of a commoner is a re-pulsive and unacceptable thing. Let him not marry the daughter of a commoner because they are detestable and their wives are vermin, and of their daughters it is said “cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast.” ... We do not commit testimony to them; we do not accept testimony from them; we do not reveal a secret to them; we do not appoint them

> as guardians for orphans; we do not appoint them stewards over charity funds; and we must not join their company on the road. Some say, “We do not proclaim their losses too.”
>
> The Rabbis taught: “A man should sell all his possessions and marry the daughter of a scholar ... to be assured that his sons will be scholars, but he should not marry a daughter of a commoner ... or his children will be commoners.” ... Rabbi Akiba recalled, “when I was a commoner I said, ‘If I could lay my hands on a scholar, I would maul him like an ass!’” ... Rabbi Eliezer said: “If the common-ers did not require us for their own welfare, they would kill us!” and Rabbi Hyya taught: “A man who occupies himself with the study of the Law in the presence of a commoner evokes as much hatred from him as if he had stolen his bride ... For the enmity of a commoner toward a scholar is even more intense than that of the heathens towards Israelites, and the hatred of their wives even greater than that!”[366]

What’s clear here is that the snobbery Holding refers to is *not* an attitude the commoners themselves had. The commoners didn’t despise *themselves* as vermin, or regard marrying each other as repulsive and detestable, or refuse to accept each other’s testimony or walk together on the road. No, this was an attitude held by the Jewish elite, which was so snobbish, arrogant, and contrary to the Torah that it was widely *despised* by commoners. The passages above prove this, since Akiba reports what his own opinion was when *he* was a commoner: he wanted to kick the living hell out of these snobby bastards—until he became one. The hatred commoners had for the Jewish elite is amply attested above. It’s doubtful that all elites were such jerks, or that commoners were all so bloodthirsty and irate. But even if they all were, that would tell us nothing about how the Christians were perceived by the commoners and middlemen they actually evangelized and converted.

It’s worth noting in passing that the reference above to not accepting testimony from ‘commoners’ cannot be a reference to qualification to provide legal testimony, since we have countless examples of commoners testifying in court (even Acts shows Peter repeatedly being allowed to testify in court, yet Holding makes a point of emphasizing Peter’s status as a commoner), and the lists of disqualified witnesses never include being a

commoner. If not a mere hyperbole (which it may be), the reference is probably to seeking a witness to one's own faithfulness to the law, under the provision of Leviticus 5:1 (see Chapter 11). In other words, in applying the "oath of testimony" under this law, they would not deign to ask a commoner to vouch for them, nor would they deign to vouch for a commoner. Such a remark would thus not be a declaration that commoners were not trusted as witnesses, so much as a declaration that it was unseemly to associate with them (as it was unseemly to appoint them to respectable positions in the community, marry their daughters, let them in on their secrets, or talk to them on the street). That either is likely is further confirmed by the fact that the actual word used in the Talmud here does not actually mean "commoner" in Holding's intended sense, but *anyone* who held no regard for Pharisaic purity laws, and thus the term frequently included even the High Priest himself. Hence scholars now conclude that the "commoners" here referred to "cannot be identified exclusively with the peasant, since townsmen and aristocrats were included among them."[367]

Holding's only other piece of evidence confirms the point: in Acts 4 it's not the people or any converts who were bothered by Peter and John being "illiterate laymen," but the enemies of the Church—the Jewish elite (Acts 4:1-6). The word *agrammatoi* literally means "without letters," i.e. unable to read or write, hence "illiterate" (and by extension "uneducated"); and *idiôtai* literally means "one who is by himself" and thus "private person," and by extension any nonprofessional. Thus "commoner" and "layman" could both capture the sense. It generally indicated someone who had no skill or trade, hence it could carry the derogatory sense of "bumpkin," etc. But it did not mean "ignorant" in a sweeping sense of stupid or clueless, only in a technical sense of lacking formal knowledge (remarkably, Greek had at least 31 words meaning "ignorant" in one context or another, yet *idiôtai* was not one of them). Acts thus claims this of the founders Peter and John.

But that's irrelevant for the same reason as Holding's citation of the Pharisaic snobbery of the Talmud. For contrary to the needs of his argument, "the people" *stood by them* and prevented any harm being done to them (Acts 4:21; so also 5:26, 14:4). In fact, according to Acts 5:13, "the people praised them." Moreover, the Christians then diatribe against the wicked elite (Acts 4:24-31), and *immediately* Acts goes on to praise the

exemplary anti-elitist lifestyle of the Christians that the people so admired (Acts 4:32-37). We've seen in several chapters already how this anti-elitism was Christianity's greatest asset. Thus, it's significant that here Acts celebrates *that*, instead of reveling in the strength of any other evidence of the movement's "truth." For the only evidence referred to is this "great power" with which the Apostles delivered their witness of the resurrection (Acts 4:33), meaning their passionate conviction and continuing miracles, not evidence the resurrection itself was true—for which all anyone really had was the Apostles' word.

Accordingly, as Acts 4 says, it's not *evidence of the resurrection* the Jewish elite "could say nothing against" (even though Peter appealed to it in Acts 4:10), but only the fact that Peter and John could heal the sick (see Acts 4:9 and 4:14). And it's only *that* which their enemies consider "a famous miracle, obvious to everyone in Jerusalem," which they therefore "cannot deny" (Acts 4:16); and it's only evidence of *this* that they seek to suppress (Acts 4:17-18). Evidence of the resurrection is never a concern: the Jews don't say *that* was a famous miracle they could not deny, nor do they bother attempting to suppress any evidence of it. Even Peter appeals only to his own healing miracles as evidence for the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4:8-10). Thus, it was continuing miracles in the Church that were considered persuasive, *not* any actual evidence of Christ's resurrection. We shall discuss this appeal to ongoing 'miracles' in Chapter 13. It suffices for now to point out that since pagan gods could heal just as well as the Christian God could, the efficacy of Christian healing is not "irrefutable" evidence that Jesus Lives (as we saw in Chapters 6 and 7).

Ultimately, Holding presents no evidence that the illiteracy or lay status of Christian missionaries (even if genuine) "would have hindered their preaching" among those whom they actually evangelized—which were primarily other illiterate laymen, but even beyond that, always those outside (or marginalized within) the elite power structure (I've discussed this point in numerous chapters already, and shall again in Chapter 18). So when Holding claims "the Jews themselves had no trust in such people," he is yet again engaging in hasty generalization: as we just saw, even his own evidence proves that "the Jews" by and large *did* trust such people (and often *distrusted* the educated elite). It was only the tiny minority of those in power (and who thus had a vested interest in defending that power against the growing popularity of lay missionaries) who didn't approve—

and even then Holding's evidence doesn't say these elites didn't *trust* Peter, only that they didn't like what he was saying. And as Acts intimates repeatedly, they didn't like it because by preaching it Peter was usurping elite authority. Which means it must have been a fact that a great many Jews trusted men like Peter—after all, *that was the problem.*

13. Would the Facts Be Checked?

Boiling away the Hyperbole

Revisiting an earlier argument, James Holding contends that "Christian claims would have been easy to check out and verify" because everyone in antiquity was such a nosy busybody that everyone would know everything about anything that ever happened. I've already addressed much of this argument in Chapter 7. Here I will limit myself to the more particular claims that (1) people knew everyone's business and (2) people actually did check the facts. The truth is not that "*no one* would have cared to find out such things," but that, regardless of what they cared to do, actual converts (as opposed to those who rejected the faith) *did not* engage any kind of fact-checking relevant to Holding's argument.

First, I have no quarrel with the view that privacy was not of great value in antiquity (compared to today), especially in regard to enforcing moral behavior. But when Holding claims "privacy was unknown," he is easily refuted by the fact that the ancient world was awash with secret initiations, secret doctrines, and secret meetings. If he really thinks you couldn't keep a secret, or do things in secret, or conspire in secret, he has a truly perverse idea of human nature and human history, and is certainly deviating completely from anything Malina & Neyrey argue, whom he cites as his source (his tendency to abuse their claims was already demonstrated in Chapter 10). Indeed, Jesus himself advocated secret doctrines and secret behavior (see Mark 4:10-11 and Matthew 6:4, 6:6, 6:18), and after his death "appeared" only in secret, behind closed doors, or off in the wilderness, away from the prying eyes of outsiders (see John 20:19 and 20:26; Luke 24; Matthew 28:17; Acts 1).

Holding simply ignores the fact that Malina and Neyrey actually argue the *opposite* of what he concludes here. Far from claiming that everyone knew everything, they argue that secrets were of paramount priority in groupthink cultures, far more so than even today, and that outsiders often would not even be told in-group truths, much less personal truths.[368] What Malina and Neyrey mean when they discuss public scrutiny is just that: scrutiny in public of the behavior of others. Though this does mean there was a strong public suspicion of secrecy—such that everyone

avoided the *appearance* of keeping secrets—that only meant secrets were kept even tighter in antiquity than today. The mere fact that you *had* secrets would often be kept secret. But keeping secrets was still a reality, and an accepted one.

For example, when we look at the cultural values expressed in the Bible we find the opposite of what Holding wants. Rather than it being okay to be a "busybody" and investigate what everyone was doing, it was actually quite immoral to partake in gossip—not only to gossip yourself, but even to listen to gossip. Consider these Old Testament pronouncements: "a tattletale exposes secrets, but those of loyal spirit conceal the matter"; "a twisted man sows strife, and a tattletale separates best friends"; "he who covers up a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates even friends"; "he who goes about as a tattletale exposes secrets: therefore, have no fellowship with him who entices with his lips"; "do not disclose a secret to another"; and "where there is no wood, the fire goes out: so where there is no tattletale, strife goes away."[369] And the New Testament shares this scorn for gossiping: "not only do they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not" and "let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or *as a busybody in other men's affairs*."[370] Thus, someone who goes around spying on people is equated with murderers, thieves, and evildoers in general. You were not even to associate with tattlers. And you were expected to shut your mouth and keep secret the affairs of family and friends.

Of course, it's still true that privacy as such was not valued, and the public always kept its eye on what was going on within public view. But the aim of this was only to enforce moral order—it was not mere curiosity, nor a desire to seek knowledge, much less of everyone's private affairs. So we have to reduce Holding's apologetic hyperbole once again, and when we boil away the exaggerations, what we have left is this: it is indeed wrong to suppose that "no one would care" about what the Christians were doing (before or after Jesus died), but this does not mean "everyone would know" what the Christians were doing (before or after Jesus died), nor does it have anything to do with going out and fact-checking every amazing claim. So Holding's evidence here does not justify his conclusion. Rumor would certainly spread (and possibly exaggerate) the public acts of Christians, as of Jesus. But for all those events that *only the*

privileged in-group got to witness, Malina and Neyrey's thesis actually entails that it is highly *improbable* the truth would ever be found out by those not admitted to the group.

This leaves us with only one other way to check Holding's claim: to examine what prospective converts *actually did* when faced with the amazing claims of Christians, and to see what kind of evidence actually persuaded them. Here I agree with Holding that in antiquity strangers had to validate and verify their status as trustworthy—but this in no way entails they did this the same way we do today. And the evidence confirms they did not. Strangers established trust by shows of sincerity, moral propriety, knowledge of cultural lore and custom (e.g. scripture), and good deeds. Anyone who met those criteria would be trusted—because people actually believed no one capable of all that would lie.[371] Whether a stranger could still be viewed as *mistaken* would then depend on the evidence they presented, and that's where Holding's argument runs into serious trouble, because the standards of evidence most people followed back then where quite unlike those we follow today. This is a point I already addressed in Chapter 7 and shall examine more specifically in Chapter 17. But below we shall see it in action.

Finally, in his many other books, Bruce Malina (as well as Holding's other favorite, David DeSilva) explains how Christians often sought converts by first persuading groups they already shared associations with (e.g. local Jews) and then leapfrogging from there to other groups who shared associations with *that* group (e.g. family members of converts, fellow townsmen of converts, etc.).[372] As Paul himself tells us, he exploited whatever in-group relations he had to get in good with the targets of his evangelism.[373] Acts exhibits this strategy repeatedly. I'll discuss this a little more in Chapter 18. But here it's enough to note that Holding seems to assume ancient Christians acted like modern Jehovah's Witnesses and just went knocking on random doors to cold-sell the faith. That is not what they did. Instead, they mostly *relied* on groupthink to sell the faith. By first appealing to a group they were already a part of, they were not seen as strangers, but comrades (in respect to whatever relation was being exploited at the time, whether family, race, trade, etc.). Then, once they were accepted into that group locally, that group could then introduce them to their neighbors. So again the Christians were not perceived as complete strangers, but as friends recommended by friends.

Though Christians did not always rely on this tactic, it was their most common and important strategy, and it greatly reduced the burden on them to prove their merit and thus win trust.

The Conversions in Acts

I already explained in Chapter 7 why we can't trust Acts to be any more reliable than even the mediocre histories of the day, which were certainly not paragons of reliability. Even the *Histories* of Herodotus is superior to Acts as a critical history, and yet quite prone to reporting the ridiculous. Unlike Luke, for example, Herodotus often mentions his sources or methods, or even names his sources, or gives different accounts of the same event, and often expresses a healthy skepticism.[374] Yet Herodotus reports without a hint of doubt that, just a generation or two before he wrote, the temple of Delphi magically defended itself with animated armaments, lightning bolts, and collapsing cliffs; the sacred olive tree of Athens, which had been burned by the Persians, grew a new shoot an arm's length in a single day; a miraculous flood-tide wiped out an entire Persian contingent after they desecrated an image of Poseidon; a horse gave birth to a rabbit; and the Chersonesians witnessed a mass resurrection of cooked fish.[375] Modern historians find that even in mundane matters Herodotus erred or fabricated a great deal.[376] We can therefore expect no better from Acts—indeed, we have every reason to expect less. But it's the *only* historical record we have of the early Christian mission, so when we want to examine how and why people converted, Acts is our only useful source outside of Paul, who only corroborates the general picture drawn by Acts. Except where I explain below, I will assume Luke has the basic facts straight about this—that whatever embellishments he or tradition may have added, there is a genuine record somewhere behind each episode. I may be wrong about that, but as you'll see, even granting that much, the evidence from Acts pretty much kills Holding's argument.

I won't bother with those who supposedly became believers *before* Jesus died, since that tells us nothing about the strength of evidence for his *resurrection*, and it's the latter that Holding claims to be "irrefutable." But when we look at those later converts, we don't see what Holding wants. In effect, Holding claims prospective converts would have fact-checked before believing, or at the very least would have done so after committing

to the faith. This is an empirical prediction, which if true should be born out in the evidence: the historical record of Acts should show people behaving exactly as Holding predicts they would. But Acts contains *not even a single example* of this prediction being fulfilled. Worse, what evidence it does present confirms *exactly the opposite*. Thus, the empirical evidence completely refutes Holding's theory. It is falsified decisively, and by his own evidence.

As far as Acts reports, Christian conversions *never* took place after days of careful research and investigation—much less weeks or months of correspondence and travel, as would have been required for most—but *immediately*, upon the direct witness of a missionary's words and deeds. Indeed, as we'll see later on below, when we examine those few cases where we can document careful deliberation before conversion (which only appear about a hundred years after the Christian mission began), even these show no sign of the kind of research Holding has in mind. But first, simply survey all the reports of conversion in Acts. Even assuming Acts is entirely accurate and true (though on the obvious exaggeration of numbers see Chapter 18), it thoroughly refutes Holding's argument:

Event 1: The first time the resurrection of Jesus is ever preached to the public is on the Pentecost, nearly fifty days (almost two months) after Jesus died—so quite some time after any facts could be easily checked. Yet Acts claims "about three thousand" were persuaded that day by a mere speech (Acts 2:1-42). Thousands of people, we are told, decided to convert *immediately*. Not a single one of them checked a single fact. These converts do no other research, make no other inquiry, make no effort at all to interrogate Peter or any other witnesses or check any of the material facts. The authorities are not consulted. No one asks to hear Joseph of Arimathea on the matter of what happened to the body, or indeed any other Christian besides Peter. They simply trust what Peter says—which is woefully ambiguous and short on details (as we'll see below).

Thus, right from the start, Holding's theory is refuted: *no one checked anything*. Acts itself says so: all that these converts needed, the only standard of evidence they apparently employed in deciding whether to accept or reject Christianity, was a persuasive speech. Just words. Nothing else. Indeed, they seem more persuaded by Peter's promise that

they will be “forgiven” and “saved” by baptism (Acts 2:38-41) than by anything we would call empirical (much less “irrefutable”) evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. We should also note that Peter’s audience was not comprised of stuffy Pharisees or local well-informed Palestinian Jews, but primarily foreign Diaspora Jews from all over the world (Acts 2:5 & 2:9-11) and pagan converts to Judaism (Acts 2:10). Nor does Luke bother to tell us how many of these converts remained in the fold—for all we know, after they checked the facts, or felt the disfavor of the authorities, they left. We have no evidence they didn’t.

Event 2: The next conversion-event mentioned in Acts turns out the same way: “about two thousand” more are persuaded *immediately* by nothing but Peter’s *speech* (Acts 3:1-4:4). None of these converts did any research or fact-checking either: a single healing is all they needed to see, and all they needed to hear was an oration that appealed to nothing but scripture and Peter’s own word that the disciples “witnessed” the risen Jesus. No details at all are given about what that meant, nor any details that would confirm it as an accurate interpretation of whatever they did see. And aside from Peter, no one else’s testimony is given, nor is any other testimony asked for by anyone before they convert. None of Peter’s claims are checked at all, by any means whatever. So, even if we accept the ridiculous numbers, Holding is refuted all the more: Acts proves (on Holding’s assumption that it’s true) that *thousands* were willing to convert on hardly any evidence at all, and certainly not on any evidence *we* have good reason to trust—and by no means “irrefutable” evidence.

Event 3: Acts then mentions increasing numbers here and there, but doesn’t say why anyone was converting or on what evidence, until the next big conversion event comes up: when Philip evangelizes the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-14). Again, his lone, uncorroborated claims and his own ‘healings’ are sufficient to persuade them. No one does any fact-checking first, of any kind whatever, before converting. No investigations. No interrogations. Nothing. They don’t even ask to hear other witnesses corroborate Philip’s testimony. For no other Apostles go there until *after*

converts were made. So again Holding is refuted: people did *not* check the facts in any acceptable way at all before converting.

Event 4: More Samaritans in outlying villages are converted later, but we again aren't told how (Acts 8:25). But then Philip converts a Jewish Ethiopian official through nothing more than a scripture lesson—no fact-checking, no questioning, no evidence of any kind is appealed to or requested, no other witnesses sought. The Ethiopian simply converts on the spot (Acts 8:27-39). Again, Holding is refuted.

Event 5: Then Paul is converted by a vision (Acts 9:1-19), not an encounter with any flesh-and-blood Jesus, *nor by any other evidence at all* except (perhaps) the ability of Ananias to heal Paul's hysterical blindness. This is particularly important, because Paul must have had access to all the evidence Holding insists was "irrefutable," and yet he didn't convert. None of that evidence, whatever it was, persuaded Paul at all. So it could not possibly have been "irrefutable." Paul had to see God himself to be convinced! And yet he didn't really "see" anything objectively empirical —he did not see the body of Jesus risen from the grave, just a bright light in the sky, and a voice no one else attests to hearing. Acts gives three different accounts of this event that are hopelessly contradictory, of course. In Acts 9:7, Luke says Paul's unnamed traveling companions heard the voice but saw nothing (*mêdena*), but in Acts 22:9 Paul himself says they heard nothing but saw the light. In Acts 26:13-14 Paul doesn't say what they saw or heard, though he says they all fell down with him, but in Acts 9:7 Luke says they remained standing. Since we don't have any of this from them (not even in Acts, which fails to name them, nor do they speak, nor are they present on either occasion when Paul himself tells the story), even Acts confirms there was no testimony to this voice but Paul's.

Events 6 & 7: Vague mentions follow of Christian numbers increasing, but the next account that tells us anything as to why is the supposed conversion of *all* the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon (Acts 9:33-35). What convinces them? Peter heals the paralyzed Aeneas who had been in

bed eight years. Then “all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” That’s it. No facts are checked about the details of the resurrection of Jesus. No witnesses are questioned, no letters written, no authorities consulted. A single psychosomatic cure is all it took to convert two entire towns. That is not “irrefutable” evidence. It isn’t even evidence, by any modern standard. The exact same scenario unfolds in Joppa: Peter’s healing of Tabitha is all by itself sufficient to get “many to believe in the Lord” (Acts 9:36-42).

Event 8: Next comes the conversion of the household of Cornelius, who were simply following the head of their household—standard groupthink behavior (see Chapters 10 and 18). Cornelius only saw a vision of an angel instructing him to follow Peter—and all his household converts instantly right after Peter’s speech (Acts 10:33-46). No fact-checking is conducted by anyone—not even Cornelius, who had men to send to get Peter in Joppa (Acts 10:1-26), yet sent no one to inquire about any of the facts in Jerusalem (neither among the authorities there, nor any neutral witnesses, nor even any Christian witnesses). No letters are written. No interrogations are conducted. Indeed, no one even asks any questions! As soon as Peter walks in the door, Cornelius is already worshipping him. And as soon as Peter gives his sales pitch, everyone in the house is speaking in tongues and praising Jesus. Where is this “irrefutable evidence” Holding keeps talking about? Speeches, visions, and subjective spiritual feelings are all we have here—yet none of these things is a reliable proof of anything, much less that Jesus stepped out of a tomb near Jerusalem.

Event 9: Acts mentions other conversions at this point outside Palestine, but doesn’t say anything more specific until we hear the story of Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:6-12). Here we have a Roman provincial governor, a senator and proconsul—surely if anyone had the means and education to conduct a thorough investigation before converting, it was him—yet he conducts no real investigation at all. He writes no letters to anyone in Jerusalem, whether to friends, colleagues, officials, authorities, or even disciples. He asks for no interrogation of any eyewitnesses. He doesn’t even ask any questions at all about the evidence Jesus rose. He is simply

and immediately converted by one single miracle: Paul's striking his court sorcerer blind. That's it. "When he saw this, he believed." That's not even evidence, much less irrefutable evidence, that Jesus rose from the grave. So yet again, Holding's prediction that 'surely prospective converts would have checked the facts before believing' is refuted *even for an educated elite*. How much *less* would uneducated common folk do any kind of fact-checking or inquiry of any respectable kind!

Events 10 & 11: Again, further conversions are mentioned after this, but nothing specific is said as to why they converted, until we get to the conversion of the merchant Lydia (Acts 16:14-15). Did she conduct any investigation? Did she check any facts? Did she even interrogate any witnesses? No. She heard what they said and immediately "God opened her heart" and she converted, and the rest of her household followed her lead—exactly as would be expected in a groupthink culture (see Chapters 10 and 18). And all Lydia needed was a single conversation with Paul, whom even Luke admits never saw any empty tomb or the risen flesh of Jesus. Thus, yet again, Holding is refuted: no fact-checking was conducted at all. All it took was a speech. So, too, the conversion of the jailer and his household (Acts 16:22-34), though at least he supposedly got to see the "miracle" of an earthquake that cracked open the jail's doors and stocks—which (if it happened at all) is not a supernatural event, and proves nothing about the resurrection of Jesus anyway. So again there is no evidence here, much less "irrefutable evidence." Yet two entire households were converted.

Events 12 & 13: Then Paul converts "some" Jews and "a great multitude" of Judaized pagans in northern Greece by doing nothing more than spending three days (three separate Sabbaths) arguing solely from *scripture* (Acts 17:1-4). No fact-checking takes place here, either, nor does empirical evidence even come up at all. All Paul does is "reason with them from the scriptures, explaining and pointing out that the Christ *had* to suffer and rise again from the dead," and Paul's word alone was the only evidence he had that this Christ was his Jesus. And that was all it took to win tons of converts, none of whom conducted any further inquiry. In

exactly the same way, the Jews at Berea eagerly accepted the gospel simply because they "examined the scriptures daily whether these things were so" and "many of them therefore believed" (Acts 17:10-12). That's it. Scripture proved it. They needed no empirical evidence as we understand it. No mention is made of them checking or seeking anything that we would count as evidence today.

Event 14: More conversions are then mentioned, but not enough details are given, until the last passage in Acts (28:16-31). There, all Paul does is "persuade them about Jesus" by citing "the law of Moses and the prophets." No other evidence or testimony is mentioned at all, and yet in just one day of scripture lessons "some believed" on that very day. There is no investigation, no interrogation of witnesses, no letters written or received. We aren't told they had any other information better than that. And certainly if, as Acts claims, they converted on the very same day Paul spoke to them, and, as Acts implies, all Paul spoke to them about was scripture, we can conclude that none of these converts from among the Roman Jews did anything we would call "fact-checking" before believing.

That's it. Never once does Acts report *anyone* checking *any* facts pertinent to the resurrection before converting. To claim they did such checking, but that Acts simply doesn't say so (not even once), is circular reasoning: there is no evidence they did, therefore Holding cannot claim they did and then use that mere assertion as "evidence" for the resurrection. Indeed, Acts rules out any such tactic, since Acts says again and again that conversions are won on the very same day the gospel is preached—there are rarely any delays of days, weeks, or months, as would be required for evidence to be gathered, witnesses sought out and questioned, and letters exchanged. And even when any such duration is mentioned, there is still no indication that any such efforts were engaged in that time. None at all. So the facts, even from his own sources, fail to support Holding, and actually do a fair job of refuting him.

Indeed, we have the same conclusion from the other direction: for in Acts the only occasions where *any* kind of inquiry is conducted are the many trials, and the debates at Athens. And yet on *none* of those occasions was

any convert won, except a “few” only at Athens—far, far away from Jerusalem—and we find no mention there that these converts conducted any sort of inquiry beyond simply interrogating Paul, who wasn’t even an eyewitness of the risen body of Jesus or the empty tomb. Nor does the account of Athens say Paul ever referred to anything we would consider empirical evidence, much less “irrefutable” evidence. So even if Holding is right that “Christian claims would have been easy to check out and verify” (though such ‘ease’ was already refuted in Chapter 7), even then his own evidence, the book of Acts exactly as written, proves quite soundly that no such checking or verifying ever took place. Maybe those who *rejected* Christian claims checked the facts (which would mean the facts didn’t check out). But as far as Acts reveals, converts never did. Even at our most charitable, it’s still an irrefutable fact that Acts provides *no evidence whatever* that such checking or verifying preceded, or even followed, any conversion. And Acts contains the only evidence to be had on this point. So Holding has no ground to stand on when he claims that converts checked and verified the facts.

The Evidence as Reported in Acts

To the contrary, Acts shows that converts were won not by giving each one a complete dossier on all the evidence and witnesses proving Jesus rose from the grave, complete with home addresses and signed affidavits and transcribed depositions. Not even close. All that was needed was the same three-point sales pitch: "scripture says Jesus would rise, our ability to prophecy, heal, and speak in tongues proves we're not lying, and our leaders say they saw Jesus—in some sense or other, they never specify details, but you can trust us!" That would not fly today. Scripture is hopelessly ambiguous, and can be used to prove anything—especially if you cherry-pick the information you want and ignore all the rest, and put your own spin on it all, exactly as the earliest Christian missionaries did. And the miracles Christian missionaries performed were the same kinds of things pagan holy men could pull off, too. Today we know there are natural causes of such phenomena (see related discussions in Chapters 6 and 7, for example). Had we been there, we would've been able to gather the information needed to "test" whether these were genuinely miraculous in any sense—but now all that information is lost, so we have no way left to check. And it's simply not possible for us now to "check" the nature, much less the origin (natural, demonic, or divine), of private visions to a privileged handful of religious zealots. Yet, back then, as Acts would claim, that was all the information one needed to *immediately* convert hundreds if not thousands of people all over the Roman Empire. Clearly these were not critical thinkers, by any standard, much less a modern one. And there is certainly nothing here we can call "irrefutable evidence."

So the only sorts of evidence Acts directly mentions as convincing anyone (none of which we can honestly count as "evidence" that Jesus rose from the grave) are scripture and visions, current miracles, and the exemplary moral life of the Christians themselves, which won them the "favor of all the people" and convinced many to join (for example, see Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37). We already explained in Chapters 6 and 10 that in groupthink societies the moral success of a community is synonymous with divine sanction for that community and its message, and thus such

moral devotion would itself have been decisive evidence to many people of those days that the Christians were telling the truth when they said they saw Jesus or that God told them Jesus lives. Of course, we know today that's a *non sequitur*. But it was potent logic back then. Likewise, we are frequently told of the success of appeals to scripture in winning converts. For example, in Acts 17:1-4, Paul "reasoned with them *from the scriptures*, explaining and citing passages that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead," and in Acts 18:24-28, Apollos "powerfully refuted the Jews" by "demonstrating *from the scriptures* that Jesus was the Christ." Sure, clever exegesis could persuade ancient Jews, but it doesn't impress an objective investigator today, and it shouldn't.

As for the miracles, none of them was truly miraculous—at least, we cannot confirm they were, since all the data we would need to test for such a conclusion is not preserved (as explained throughout Chapter 7). The miracles that won converts (apart from the vague art of "speaking in tongues") were predominately exorcism and the healing of the "blind and lame" (and on one or two occasions the *causing* of blindness), events which we know today can easily be natural phenomena. Not only were exactly the same miracles routinely performed by pagan gods and sorcerers, but blindness and paralysis are the most typical psychosomatic phenomena and thus the most likely to respond to purely psychological treatment (i.e. "faith healing").[377] Likewise, the implied realities of exorcism we have very good reason to doubt, since despite centuries of research, medical science has failed to uncover any evidence that such a thing as demonic possession even exists. Once again, it probably denoted a psychological condition that could be corrected by a culturally acceptable psychological "treatment." And on the matter of healing, we also have good reason to doubt, since even according to Acts none of the healings that won converts actually regenerated any observable lesion or wound: all the conditions healed had no visible signs of medical trauma or disease apart from the behavior of the afflicted, who merely claim (and may really have believed) they were unable to see or move, or suffered from some other ailment they perceived as a disease. But again we have no evidence on record that this was any more than a psychological condition. No lost limbs are restored, no victim of swordplay is brought back to life, no open wounds are sealed up before anyone's eyes, no withered corpses revived.

But all this is diversion anyway, since the moral decency of Christians, the prescience of scripture, and the ability of disciples to "work miracles" of dubious kinds is irrelevant to us. None of this is evidence that the *corpse* of *Jesus* walked out of a *tomb*. Yet in Acts, these three "proofs" are the only empirical evidence that persuades people to believe Jesus did that. The only other evidence used *at all* is the unverifiable word of the disciples that they alone "saw" Jesus—which for all we can know, amounted to nothing more than what Paul or Stephen meant when they said they "saw" Jesus: namely, a "vision from Heaven."[378] Look at all the trials and public speeches documented in Acts: not a single one appeals to any confirmable piece of empirical evidence, much less anything "irrefutable."

Seriously. Look at what was actually *said* to the public or the authorities. In Acts 2:14-40 we have Peter's first, and longest, public presentation of the case. Yet his argument consists entirely of irrelevant appeals to the disciples' private, unverifiable claim to have "seen" Jesus in some unspecified sense, to an obscure exegesis of the Psalms, and to various other "miracles" that actually have no bearing on whether Jesus actually rose from the dead. That's it. According to Peter's exegesis of scripture, a descendent of David *had* to rise from the dead (Acts 2:24-31 & 2:34-36), and Jesus must have been that descendent simply because "we" saw him, though (conveniently) "you" only get to see us speaking in tongues (Acts 2:32-33). He tacks on as a final flourish a typical *ad baculum* fallacy that they'd all better believe or they're doomed (Acts 2:38-40). That's a feeble argument. Yet (supposedly) it wins thousands of instant converts.

Christian apologists like J.P. Holding do try to see in Peter's speech an appeal to the empty tomb in Acts 2:29, but this requires supposing that Luke here, suddenly, for no reason, became ignorant of all his otherwise apparent education in the principles of rhetoric. For by the standards of speech-making in antiquity, if you had evidence like an empty tomb, you would use it explicitly and directly to potent rhetorical effect—exactly as Luke does when he has Peter repeatedly remind the audience of the evidence *they* have been witness to (e.g. Acts 2:22 & 2:33). Even when he refers to what only *insiders* got to see, he does not include finding an empty tomb. Indeed, the absence of any appeal to the evidence of an empty tomb in Peter's speech lends merit to this speech deriving from an authentic tradition, especially when the rather un-Lukan distortion of the

Septuagint (and related scribal interpolations) that clumsily introduce the word “flesh” into the speech are discarded as bogus, as rightly they should be.

As far as we can tell, the actual speech Peter gave probably appealed only to a vision, not an empty tomb. For the references to “flesh” in this version in Acts are apparent interpolations—added to the speech by later scribes, or by Luke himself, who would have “assumed” Peter would say such things, as that was exactly the accepted standard of speech reporting among ancient historians (see discussion of this point in Chapter 7). There is certainly enough evidence to cast sufficient doubt on the authenticity of this material:

First, Luke can only get Peter’s scriptural argument to prove a resurrection of the *flesh* by making Peter butcher the text of the Septuagint, which would surely have made him the laughing stock of his Jewish audience, for they would know very well he was wrong about what their sacred text actually said. So it’s highly *improbable* that Peter ever attempted such an argument, and even more improbable that it would succeed in persuading anyone in his audience. Therefore, this part of the speech must be fiction. In particular, as is his *usual* practice, Luke has Peter correctly quote the Septuagint text of Psalms 16:10 in Acts 2:26-27—yet *then* Luke has Peter alter the text completely in Acts 2:31, changing a verse originally about “the holy one’s soul” (*psychê*) into a verse about his “flesh” (*sarx*), a verbal deception no educated Jew would have bought.

Second, as a clear proof of concept, this very section of Acts is rife with *known* scribal interpolations in extant manuscripts, proving not only that scribes were willing to doctor the text to add a reference to flesh, but that they *actually attempted such doctoring*. For example, “God swore to raise the Christ in the flesh” was added to Acts 2:30 in numerous later manuscripts—and that’s *obviously* bogus, since the Septuagint text in question includes no such promise from God. Indeed, some manuscripts added merely “swore to raise the Christ” without the reference to flesh. Either way, textual critics are unanimous that the original work probably included neither phrase.

Finally, just like the known forgeries in Acts 2:30, in Acts 2:31 the phrase *hê sarx autou* (“his flesh”) can be cut straight out of the text without harm to the sense, and in fact such a removal restores the original meaning of the actual Septuagint text, and *also* restores the original

parallel structure of Peter's speech: the sentence "that *he* was neither abandoned to Hades nor saw destruction" uses the same subject for two verbs, whereas inserting "his flesh" changes the subject from "he" to "flesh" and thus breaks the smoother parallel structure of the sentence.

The fact that Peter would not butcher scripture this way in a public appeal to Jews and neither would such a tactic work on any such audience, the fact that we can easily restore the correct sense by striking the suspect phrase exactly where it stands, and the fact that we have *proof* that later scribes were willing and eager to add references to the flesh here, all combined make it more probable than not that Peter did not say such a thing. Therefore, more probably than not, the original speech of Peter made no reference to a resurrection of the flesh, and thus no reference to an empty tomb. That leaves only a reference to visions, as implied in Acts 2:17. Further confirming this conclusion: had it been Peter's intent to argue that Jesus rose in the flesh, as evidence he would surely offer his own testimony that the tomb was empty and the risen body had been touched and handled and dined with them for many weeks. But these details are conspicuously absent from Peter's speech.

Otherwise, the pattern remains the same throughout Acts. For example:

Acts 3:12-26: Peter again uses an irrelevant miracle (the healing of a man "lame from his mother's womb") to sell belief in the raising of Jesus. Again, he says only "we" are witnesses to the resurrection (3:15), and that's the only evidence he has to offer, besides more irrelevant miracles (3:16) and scripture (3:18, 3:21-24). Indeed, Peter concedes there is no other evidence, for he says his audience until then was "acting in ignorance" of the evidence (3:17). Finally, yet again, an *ad baculum* fallacy closes his argument: belief is sold as a way to be "cleansed of sin" and thus saved (3:19-20, 3:25-26) and thereby avoid destruction (3:23). There's no irrefutable evidence here.

Acts 5:29-32: This time Peter argues at trial that God rose Jesus from the dead. Yet again his only evidence is that the Holy Spirit inspires the Church and he himself saw God "raise him up" and "exalt him to his right hand" (without any explanation of what that means he actually *saw*).

That's it. That's all he has to offer in his defense. There is no "Hey, you guys know the tomb was empty, how do you explain that!?" or "Hey, guys, I touched his body and ate with him, so there can be no doubt it was him!" or "Look, there were dozens of us who all saw him at the same time!" or anything like that at all. Surely in a trial for his life Peter would want to make the best defense. So if he had "irrefutable" evidence to appeal to, where is it? In fact, why does Peter suddenly clam up about the amazing miracles and events of Jesus' life and death the moment he's under oath? Alarm bells should be ringing here.

Acts 7: Now Stephen is on trial, and he is asked by the prosecutor if the charges are true (7:1), at which Stephen's lengthy defense speech ensues. Yet never once does he use the resurrection as an argument, or present any evidence or testimony to that. Thus, once again, when under oath, at trial, Christians suddenly clam up about this supposedly "irrefutable" evidence Holding keeps claiming they had. All Stephen does is recite scripture (7:2-47). He then says God "does not dwell in what is made by hands" (7:48-50) as the sole logic behind his denouncing of the Temple cult. Then he compares Christians to the revered prophets of old (7:51-52). And finally he says his accusers have failed to follow their own law (7:53), which was the main moral argument of Christianity, and the reason it found a following—because the charge was widely perceived to be true (as explained in Chapter 10). But never once in Stephen's speech does he offer any evidence whatever that Jesus rose from the dead. At most he cites scripture as "proof." That's it. Nothing else. No witnesses. No material evidence. No appeals to empty tombs or Doubting Thomases. Nothing. Ultimately, he concludes with the only real "evidence" Christians apparently had: he himself has a private, unverifiable vision of Christ enthroned in Heaven, right there in court, which no one else sees (7:54-56). Sorry, that simply doesn't cut it for us.

Acts 10:33-43: Peter preaches in public now to Gentiles (who are already Jewish sympathizers or the kin, friends, or servants of sympathizers). Peter says they all know about the ministry of Jesus starting with his baptism by John, they all know "how God anointed him with the Holy

Spirit and with power" and how he "did good and healed all who were oppressed by the Devil," but then he says only "we" (his original followers) are "witnesses of *all* the things he did." When he finally gets to something relevant to Holding's argument, note the curious way Peter puts his case: "God raised Jesus up on the third day and *allowed* that he should become visible *not to all the people*, but only to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God," meaning "we who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." Thus, Peter makes a specific point of the fact that he has no evidence at all except his word: no one else saw anything, indeed God didn't even *let* anyone else see anything, much less all this eating and drinking. And there is, again, no mention at all of an empty tomb. Finally, as usual, Peter includes an appeal to scripture, declaring it's "all the prophets" who "bear witness" that those who believe in Jesus gain forgiveness of sins. Once again, in this speech we fail to find any of this "irrefutable evidence" Holding insists Peter had.

Acts 13:17-41: Paul begins his ministry in a synagogue. What is his case? He summarizes the history of Israel on up to David, and claims the promised "savior" was Jesus. He appeals to the assertions of John the Baptist. But that's it. Rather than presenting "irrefutable" evidence, Paul essentially concedes he has nothing of the kind, for "those who live in Jerusalem and their leaders" do *not* "recognize Jesus," nor the scriptures that prove who he was. Though Paul makes a point of noting that Jesus was buried "in a tomb" before God raised him, Paul makes no appeal to any evidence or witness to that tomb being empty. All he says is, quite ambiguously, that "for many days he appeared" to his disciples. He engages some exegesis of scripture, but presents no more evidence. Paul even tries to shame them into believing by quoting Habakkuk 1:5. Yet after all this, the *only* evidence Paul ever presents that Jesus "didn't decay" is that he "appeared." Period. And no one can verify that, since only a few specially chosen people got to see this—and Paul doesn't even explain exactly what it was they claimed to see. As usual, he makes no relevant distinction between these appearances and his own witness of Jesus in a vision from Heaven.

Acts 23:1-10: Now Paul is on trial. His defense consists solely of insisting he was simply a law-abiding citizen "on trial for the hope of the resurrection of the dead" which many of his accusers also shared. Consequently, some of the jurors find him innocent, from the quite reasonable argument that "suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" That's it. The only reason they don't condemn him is that they cannot refute his claim to have seen a private vision. We can agree. Nor is there any way, for them or us, to *confirm* it either, or anything about it, including its true content or cause. But there remains no mention here of any other evidence on his side. The jurors just had to take Paul's word for it. It's curious how Paul does not introduce any witnesses or material evidence to support his case—once again, all this "irrefutable" evidence Holding insists he had is nowhere to be found, even when Paul is on trial for his very life and honor!

Acts 24:10-26:32: Paul again has a chance to defend himself in several trials and hearings over two years (see Chapter 7). And yet once again, when under oath, Paul always clams up about any of this supposedly "irrefutable" evidence Holding claims he had. Paul's defense can be summed up quite simply as: all Jews hope for the resurrection as he does, so why is he on trial? The only charge mentioned is that "he teaches the resurrection of the dead," which he insists they also teach. There is no direct mention of the resurrection of Jesus—either as any part of the charge against him, or as any element at all of his defense. Even when he is specifically asked to explain "faith in Christ Jesus," all he teaches them is "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come." He makes no mention of empty tombs or even a risen Jesus. Only years later is there any mention of the issue being an esoteric religious squabble over "Jesus, who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive," which is quite ambiguous as to what that means. Festus says outright that he doesn't know how to investigate the charge (25:20) and has nothing relevant to tell Caesar about it (25:26)—a funny thing to say, if there were all these incredible "facts" that he could "check," as Holding insists. Ultimately, through all this, Paul's only evidence at trial that Jesus was still "alive" is a private, unverifiable "vision from Heaven" (26:19) and a divine voice claiming to be Jesus. That's it. That's all Paul has to offer, and that's all Agrippa needs

to hear to acquit him. Paul would've been free had he not appealed to Caesar. No other investigation is conducted, no other evidence is even mentioned.

We've just skimmed all the major speeches in Acts, even 'official' trial defenses under oath, many recorded at substantial length, and yet not one iota of "irrefutable" evidence is mentioned. The same can be said of all the other trials and speeches. That pretty much refutes Holding's contention that there was such evidence to be had. If amazing evidence of any sort existed, surely we would have it mentioned in these sections of Acts. But we find none.

In the end, all of Holding's predictions are contradicted or fail to pan out, even when we look at his own evidence—the only evidence there is for the early Christian mission: the book of Acts. For example, Holding claims "the empty tomb would be checked." Yet we have not a single example in Acts of any convert ever checking this fact, before converting or after. We don't even have one single example of any convert asking for evidence there *was* an empty tomb. The story Luke tells in his Gospel has at least a few disciples checking, but this evidence is curious for its absence all throughout Acts. Instead, from *both* the Epistles *and* Acts it's clear the empty tomb was never used as evidence, nor ever questioned by anyone. Thus, Holding's prediction fails. In a similar fashion, Holding claims "Matthew's story of resurrected saints would be checked out." Yet there's no evidence in Luke that this event *even happened*, nor any evidence in Acts that anyone ever checked it, in any way whatsoever, or even so much as asked anyone for testimony on the matter. In fact, there is no evidence anyone had even heard of such a claim until long after Paul's death. So, again, Holding's claim fails to find any support in the evidence we have.

Likewise, Holding claims the resurrected "Lazarus would be sought out for questioning." Yet there's no evidence at all that anyone did this, either. Indeed, a real Lazarus is only ever mentioned in one document: the Gospel of John, by all accounts the last of the New Testament Gospels to be written. So as far as Holding can actually prove, the story didn't even *exist* until *long* after the facts could be checked. More troubling for Holding's case is the fact that Luke is the only other author to mention

anyone named Lazarus, yet *only as a fictional person in a parable* (Luke 16:20-31), which in turn mentions his resurrection only *hypothetically*. In fact, as Luke presents it, the entire point of the Lazarus parable was that scripture is the *only* evidence people will have that the Gospel is true. This confirms what I've said above against Holding's assertions to the contrary. The parable even ends with the moral that, "If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded *even if Lazarus rises from the dead*." Thus, Luke's story specifically denies that the resurrection of Lazarus would be accepted as evidence, even had it happened—and its entire point is to defend the fact that the only evidence prospective converts will ever have is *scripture*. Yet as we observed in Chapter 7, Luke is, if anyone is, the most reliable recorder of the Jesus tradition, such that if *he* does not include an actual record of Lazarus rising from the dead, but only a hypothetical parable of such, then probably *that* was the truth, and John's elaboration is the fiction. Luke supposedly followed all the stories exactly—so if there *was* a story of Lazarus actually being raised, we could conclude that Luke probably found it *false*. And the very same goes for Matthew's zombies.

In Chapter 17 we'll see that the Epistles confirm our conclusions here. For the scant evidence the Epistles offer regarding how converts were *actually* persuaded offers no support at all to Holding's hypothesis, but abundant support for quite the opposite. We find there that empirical fact-checking is practically despised, and replaced instead with scriptural exegesis and appeals to miracles and visions, none of which can be verified as anything more than natural phenomena. We also find no references there to any relevant empirical evidence being checked at all, much less examples of the application of any critical reason and inquiry upon that evidence. Thus we can only conclude that Holding's argument is at best without foundation, and at worst complete poppycock.

The Indications from Early Apologists

That sums up the only relevant sources we have for the Christian mission in its first hundred years, and we found no support for Holding's thesis, and much to contradict it. Once we go beyond that time frame, we are way beyond the reasonable possibility of converts checking (much less confirming) the relevant facts in the way Holding has in mind. Even so, surely the most educated and inquisitive converts would still have done their best at doing all this historical fact-checking Holding insists they did. And we can certainly say that in the 2nd century A.D. Christianity finally started attracting *bona fide* elite scholars—not many, mind you, but at least some, and by their very nature they left us highly articulate accounts of their reasons for converting. Yet when we look at the first generation of these men, the first elite scholars to join the fold and believe, we *still* fail to find evidence supporting Holding's thesis. Once again, what we find is quite the opposite. The first four elite scholars we know became Christians, all before the year 150 A.D. (see discussion in Chapter 7), are Justin, Athenagoras, Aristides, and Tatian. The philosopher Quadratus would be a fifth, but we have no extant writing from him to judge his reasoning by. We otherwise don't know the scholarly credentials of other early Christian writers like Papias or Aristion (and in the case of Papias they are deeply in doubt, whereas in Aristion's case we lack any surviving passages to judge). But of the first four just named, all wrote lengthy treatises that survey their reasons for converting, which we still more or less have. Yet we look in vain in them for even one single example of "fact-checking" the resurrection claim in any respectable sense.

Justin Martyr appeals almost exclusively to scripture—his entire *Apology* virtually rests on the single argument "scripture says so, therefore it's true." Occasionally he makes references to some vague Gospel tradition, but never once mentions ever checking the claims in that tradition against objective, independent sources. Never once does he discuss determining who the Gospel authors were or even where they got their information, much less make any effort to determine whether their claims were true. He never mentions speaking to anyone at all—no descendants or colleagues of

any witnesses (hostile, neutral, or friendly) to any element of the Christian story. The closest he comes to citing any sources at all are one casual reference to the census returns under Quirinius, and a confident citation of the *Acts of Pilate* as a reliable authority. Yet the latter is an infamous forgery, and the fact that he trusts this document reflects very poorly on Justin's competence to "check the facts" as Holding would want. And the former source tells us nothing as to whether Jesus rose from the dead—or anything supernatural at all. Apart, of course, from his uncritical reliance on the Gospels.[379]

That a man named Jesus would be born in Bethlehem under Quirinius is not remarkable, even supposing this could indeed be confirmed. Archaeological evidence suggests the name of Jesus was so common that around 1 in 10 to 1 in 20 Jews had that name, and between 1 in 79 and 1 in 312 had that name *as well as* a father named Joseph.[380] In any given year, between 4% and 10% of any town's population would consist of newborn babies (see sources on demography in Chapter 7). Bethlehem was significant enough to have a population of at least 500 to 1000, for a total of 20 to 50 babies in any given year. This number increases enormously if, as Luke claims, everyone *born* at Bethlehem had to register there, even if they lived elsewhere. But ignoring that, the available estimates produce odds between 6% and 47% of a Joseph with a baby Jesus in Bethlehem in any given year, simply by chance. In fact, odds are there would be one such pairing in Bethlehem every 2 to 16 years. That's far from remarkable.

But Justin doesn't say he checked the records himself anyway. He doesn't say where these records were kept or how he could gain access to protected government documents—and there is no plausible reason to believe he could (as explained in Chapter 7, the Romans kept most government information secret, and surely did not allow citizens, much less suspected rebels, the opportunity to doctor or destroy official records). Rather, since Justin is writing to an emperor, he was probably *assuming* this tradition was a fact (his information appears to derive solely from Luke), and therefore assuming the emperor—who certainly did have access to government records—could confirm it. There is no evidence anyone ever actually checked these records, much less confirmed the claim.

Indeed, beyond that, Justin makes it quite clear that if scripture "said" it, he believed it was true—period. He needed no further checking as far as we can tell. As Justin says, "this should now be obvious to you—that *whatever* we assert in conformity with what has been taught us by Christ, and by the prophets who preceded Him, *are alone true*, and are older than all the writers who have existed" and therefore take precedence over all other beliefs. End of argument. In fact, for all we really know, *every single thing* Justin believed about Jesus he learned from *scripture*, not historical investigation. As he says himself:

> So in these books of the prophets we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man's estate, and healing every disease and every sickness, and raising the dead, and being hated, and unrecognized, and crucified, and dying, and rising again, and ascending into Heaven, and both being, and being called, the Son of God. We find it also predicted that certain persons should be sent by Him into every nation to publish these things, and that even among the Gentiles men should believe in Him. And He was predicted before He appeared, first 5,000 years before, and again 3,000, then 2,000, then 1,000, and yet again 800; for in the succession of gener-ations prophets after prophets arose.[381]

This reveals that he could find everything he believed in scripture, and that he accepted as a fundamental methodological principle that everything found in scripture was true. And he was serious. You can read Justin's two apologies back to front and *never once find any other methodological principle or source of his faith*. That's it. That is the sum of his "fact-checking." The Bible Says It, Therefore I Believe It. If this is how a highly educated elite could come to convert—and it clearly was—then we have no hope at all for the uneducated masses employing any more effective principle of inquiry. Holding's theory is utterly smashed.

This is confirmed when we read Justin's own autobiographical account of his conversion. He tells us he actively studied every philosophy, and reports with regret either that faith in God was devalued by the philosophical schools, or they demanded money, or they required him to study the sciences, a demand he openly regards with anti-intellectual scorn. Clearly this was no critical thinker, nor any admirer of careful

empirical inquiry. He ends up a Platonist only because it agrees with his fundamental (and ultimately unexplained) assumption of a mystical, nonempirical approach to knowledge. And then from there he "thought" his way to Christianity, after conversing either with himself or an actual Christian elder (depending on whether you take his account literally or figuratively). If we read between the lines, Justin is telling us he chose Christianity because it was the only philosophy that placed God first, taught its doctrines for free, and didn't require any research or advanced study. He adds, as the final blow that converted him, the fact that Christianity was based on the oldest and thus most venerable of prophetic books.[382] At no point in his own account of conversion is *evidence* ever mentioned. And none of his reasons for converting—not even a single one—is rational or valid, whether logically or empirically. "Fact-checking" appears nowhere in Justin's list of methods or arguments. It played no demonstrable role in his conversion at all. And there is no reason to doubt other Christians, from the very beginning, would all have converted for the same illogical reasons as Justin.

As I've said again and again, above all things it's scripture that wins Justin over. He spends most of his time arguing from that, and that alone. In fact, the very reason his dialogue is a debate between Christianity and Judaism—not paganism—is the fact that pagans can boast no oracles so ancient as the Bible, and therefore Judaism is the only alternative even worth considering. The Bible's antiquity, and nothing else, is logically sufficient in Justin's eyes to secure its absolute authority (as we saw more generally in Chapter 4). The closest Justin ever comes to citing anything like empirical evidence in support of Christianity is when he argues from the present efficacy of Christian exorcism and other dubious miracle-working (already discussed above). And yet even here we find only a maddeningly superstitious line of reasoning:

> It is also manifest to all, that we who believe in Him pray to be kept by Him from strange, wicked and deceitful spirits, as the word of prophecy, personating one of those who believe in Him, figuratively declares. For we do continually beseech God by Jesus Christ to preserve us from the demons which are hostile to the worship of God, and whom we of old time served, in order that, after our conversion by Him to God, we may be blameless. For we call Him Helper and

> Re-deemer, the power of whose name even the demons do fear; and at this day, when they are exorcised in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, they are overcome. And thus it is manifest to all, that His Father has given Him so great power, by virtue of which demons are sub-dued to His name, and to the dispensation of His suffering.
>
> ...
>
> [From such power each Christian also receives] gifts, each as he is worthy, illumined through the name of this Christ. For one receives the spirit of understanding, another of counsel, another of strength, another of healing, another of foreknowledge, another of teaching, and another of the fear of God. ... Accordingly, we who have received gifts from Christ, who has ascended up on high, prove from the words of prophecy that you, "the wise in yourselves, and the men of understanding in your own eyes," are foolish, and honor God and His Christ by lip only.[383]

The "wise" and the "men of understanding" are common epithets for philosophers, scientists, and scholars. Thus, all learning, all research, and all science is foolish. Only the Bible is worth our attention. That's Justin's message. And that Christians have correctly interpreted the Bible is proven by the mere fact that they can exorcise demons, heal, and prophesy —the only "gifts" he lists that could ever be imagined as supernatural (and yet, as we discussed above, they now cannot be proven anything of the kind). But even the fact that Christians are gifted with ordinary human strength, talent, zeal, and inspiration Justin sees as "proof" that Christianity is true. That's how bankrupt his thinking is. His reasons for believing make no logical sense. Yet they are reasons so compelling to him that they stir him to passionate and unshakable belief. And Justin was not some rare nutjob. He is *representative* of the early Christian mindset. *These* were the sorts of people who were becoming Christians, not the Lucians, Ciceros, Galens, or Plinys of the world. As far as we can tell, all those people who actually believed in genuine fact-checking stayed clear.

We find little different in any of the other elite scholars on our list. Consider Athenagoras: once again, no mention, anywhere in his works, of

fact-checking (or even what we would consider empirical evidence) that Jesus rose from the dead. Instead, in the summary he gives of his reasons for becoming a Christian, we find only this illogical line of argument:

> The unity of the Deity is confessed by almost all, even against their will, when they come to treat of the first principles of the universe, and we in our turn likewise assert that He who arranged this universe is God ... [and] we are able to demonstrate what we apprehend and justly believe, namely that there is one God, with proofs and reason accordant with truth. For poets and philosophers, as to other sub-jects so also to this, have applied themselves in the way of conjecture, moved, by reason of their affinity with an inspiration from God, each one by his own soul, to try whether he could find out and apprehend the truth. But they have not been found competent fully to apprehend it, because they thought fit to learn about God, not from God, but each one from himself. Hence they came each to his own conclusion respecting God, and matter, and forms, and the world. But we have for wit-nesses of the things we apprehend and be-lieve, prophets, men who have pronounced concerning God and the things of God, guid-ed by the Spirit of God. And you too will admit, excelling all others as you do in intel-ligence and in piety towards the true God, that it would be irrational for us to give heed to mere human opinions, and cease to believe in the Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the prophets like musical instru-ments.[384]

Translation: Screw you, all you academic lunkheads, and screw all your logic and science and scholarship. We have the Law and the Prophets. Everything else is obvious. End of argument.

Like Justin, Athenagoras is persuaded Christianity is true simply because scripture persuades him. He never once mentions any historical *evidence* playing any role at all in confirming the truth of Christian doctrines. Instead, Athenagoras operates on the following assumptions: God must exist and logically must be one, therefore only prophets who attest to God's unity are guided by the spirit of God and thus can attest to his plans, and therefore such inspired prophets know the truth while independent thinkers and scientists do not. All that remains, then, is to figure out whose prophets are real prophets—and in that contest, once we

limit the field to monotheists (as his logic alone dictates we must), the oldest always wins. He adds it also helps, as it did for Justin, that Christians are purportedly paragons of moral virtue. From these assumptions, Athenagoras can declare not only belief, but the outright *irrationality* of *not* believing what the Bible says—in fact, it is irrational to ignore the Bible and "give heed to mere human opinions." In other words, except where they support or agree with the Bible, science, philosophy, and reason are for suckers. The Bible is the ultimate sourcebook worthy of our trust.

This doesn't mean Athenagoras, or other Christian scholars, never cared to study contemporary scientific knowledge or use it when it suited them, but that Athenagoras (for example) does not appeal to empirical evidence as a reason he came to believe Jesus rose from the dead. Nor even in general matters does he conduct any scientific or historical investigation himself, but simply repeats general scholastic knowledge. And in this case, Athenagoras never elaborates as much as Justin does as to why he believes what he does about Jesus, but when he does, the only evidence he cites is "scripture says so."[385] Does this sound like someone who "fact-checked" before believing? What facts did he check? Where does he discuss such investigations? Or even the principles that would guide such an investigation? Indeed, in his *Treatise on the Resurrection* Athenagoras actually argues at length that one must have a sound theory of method and truth before deciding what to believe. But then he presents his theory as simply this: logically God exists, therefore everything not impossible for God nor contrary to his will should be believed.[386] That's it. Actual fact-checking or research never comes up, beyond simply repeating what he's heard or read. Evidence, as we would accept it, is barely relevant. If God can and should raise people from the dead, he will.[387] End of argument. Such bizarre, illogical reasoning bewilders us today, but was common then. Indeed, we have every reason to believe it typified the Christian convert in antiquity (as we'll see in Chapter 17).

Just like Athenagoras, Aristides only argues from bare logic, and the moral caliber of Christian life, that Christians alone must have the truth. He never refers to any other evidence, apart from an unidentified "gospel" handed down attesting to God's incarnation, death, and ascension to Heaven. Aristides is convinced by nothing else than these three things. I'm not kidding. Like Justin, he surveyed all the alternatives and (in his

opinion) found them illogical, then he observed the Christian lifestyle and found it godly. Then he read the Gospels and was convinced. Those are the only pieces of evidence he offers to his audience, which was supposed to be a Roman Emperor (either Hadrian or Antoninus), among the most educated elites. Never once does he mention checking the facts. Never once does he say, as Holding imagines, "You know, I looked into these crazy Christian claims—asked around, checked documents and such—and to my surprise their stories are all true!" To the contrary, that kind of reasoning appears utterly alien to Aristides. Moral stature and armchair logic are sufficient to convince him, and are all he deems worthy of mentioning when attempting to prove his religion true—for that's all he drones on about chapter after chapter. He does appeal to the Gospels as a source, but he is completely credulous as to their content—he declares that simply from reading them he was fully assured of their truth.[388] So much for Holding's theory that he would check the facts in them first!

Finally, we have Tatian (Justin's pupil), who gives us a direct and complete account of his conversion that simply says it all:

> Wherefore, having seen pagan activities, and moreover also having been admitted to the mysteries, and having everywhere examined the religious rites performed by the effeminate and the emotional, and having found among the Romans their Latiarian Jupiter delighting in human gore and the blood of slaughtered men, and Artemis not far from the great city sanctioning acts of the same kind, and one demon here and another there instigating to the perpetration of evil, retiring by myself, I sought how I might be able to discover the truth. And, while I was giving my most earn-est attention to the matter, I happened to meet with certain barbaric writings, too old to be compared with the opinions of the Greeks, and too divine to be compared with their errors. And I was led to put faith in these by the unpretending cast of the language, the inartificial character of the writers, the fore-knowledge displayed of future events, the excellent quality of the precepts, and the declaration of the government of the universe as centered in one Being. And, my soul being taught of God, I discern that the former class of writings lead to condemnation, but that these put an end to the slavery that is in the world, and rescue us from a multiplicity of rulers and ten thousand tyrants, while they give

> us, not indeed what we had not before received, but what we had received but were prevented by error from retaining.[389]

That's it. No fact-checking. No empirical research. No asking around. He converted simply because he found other religions morally repugnant and illogical, was impressed by the antiquity of the Bible, found the Christians to be the most moral followers of that most ancient text, and therefore concluded that they had the right interpretation of the most authoritative book—authoritative for no other reason than "our philosophy is older than the systems of the Greeks" and is the most morally attractive.[390] End of story. Nowhere in his entire treatise does he ever once mention investigating *anything*, even though he devotes chapter after chapter to detailed proofs of the antiquity of the Bible and the moral superiority of Christians. In fact, nowhere does the issue of "evidence" ever arise for him at all—outside the "evidence" within scripture, and of the antiquity of scripture, and of the current moral superiority of Christians. Not only does Tatian show no interest at all in checking the facts concerning the resurrection of Jesus, but he blows a lot of ink arguing that philosophy and scholarship are a stupid waste of time.[391] And he knows this because, he says, he studied it all, the only kind of 'research' he appears to have conducted, which is completely irrelevant to whether Jesus actually rose from the dead or anything else claimed in the New Testament.[392] Once again, this appears to be the typical mindset of the early Christian converts. These are not the fact-checkers of antiquity. These are the morally self-righteous despisers of scholarship, who zealously embrace Christianity for wholly illogical reasons (at least by modern empirical standards).

Those four men were the most educated Christians before the later 2nd century A.D. Before them were only lesser lights, none of whom, as far as we can tell, conducted anything like the research into philosophical systems and alternatives that Tatian, Aristides, Athenagoras, and Justin conducted. Yet those four men, the first on record to make a complete survey of the alternatives, to actually attend the schools, never conducted any research into the claims of the Gospels. They simply believed what they were told. As long as what they were told was told them by men of moral stature and conformed to what was "predicted" in the oldest

available oracles of God, they believed it. No other investigation was required. No other investigation mattered.

This same unempirical attitude is confirmed by one other man of letters: Papias, who did not (as far as we can tell) achieve the level of study of the other four, but did at least conduct something that could loosely be called ‘research’. From surviving quotes (and one can rightly wonder why his actual books were not preserved), Papias tells us that as a Christian himself he asked around. He could find no witnesses still living, but spoke with several people who knew them. Still, he simply believed whatever he was told. He never “checked” if what he was told was true by any means we would regard as credible today. Indeed, he tells us his criteria, and they have no proper connection with empirical standards:

> I shall not hesitate to put down, along with my interpretations, whatever instructions I received with care at any time from the elders, and carefully stored up in my memory, assur-ing you at the same time of their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth; nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who ap-pealed to the commandments given by the Lord to faith and proceeding from truth itself. If, then, anyone who had attended on the elders came by, I asked minutely after their sayings—what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord’s disciples, which Aristion and the presbyter John now say as disciples of the Lord. For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.[393]

He says his criterion was not “whose statements checked out against documentary evidence and the testimony of neutral witnesses” or any such thing. Indeed, he rejects books and documents as not even worth his time. Rather, his criteria were simply: those who didn’t blabber too much to be suspicious must be telling the truth, so long as what they said agreed with already-accepted dogma. Neither of those criteria are logically or empirically valid, yet they are his only criteria. And he took them seriously. So even though he says he “questioned carefully” those who had things to say (though only ever Christians, never Jews or other neutral

parties), he never went any further than that—he never even asked how he could confirm what they said was true. And there's no evidence he ever made any such effort.

No wonder, then, that Papias related patently absurd traditions as if they were true, bringing even the early Christian scholar Eusebius to conclude that Papias was a man of "very little intelligence." As an example of his gullibility, Papias apparently reported with complete confidence that...

> Judas walked about in this world a sad example of impiety. For once his body had swollen to such an extent he couldn't pass even where a chariot could pass easily, he was crushed by a chariot, causing his bowels to gush out.[394]

This can't have been a very avid fact-checker. Yet he was clearly among the most educated of the earlier generations of Christians—a member of that elite few who actually could and did write books.[395] If this is how other converts examined Christianity—and as far as the evidence suggests, it is—then Holding cannot maintain *any* convert "checked the facts" in any reliable way. The evidence simply does not support such a claim.

Conclusion

I've shown that the ancient world was not "a society where *nothing* escaped notice," but in fact a society where secrets were expected to be kept, and where a man's word was trusted without empirical evidence so long as he proved himself a man of wisdom and virtue. Holding claims that the ancient obsession with spying on everyone to make sure they conformed to moral custom *also* meant there was "every reason to suppose that people hearing the Gospel message would check against the facts," but I've shown this was simply not true. It is, indeed, a *non sequitur*—since to spy on what people do in public in order to enforce moral behavior is categorically different from researching the evidence behind the factual claims people make. These are entirely different activities, with entirely different motives and methods behind them.

As we've seen, the evidence even from Acts and from the first elite scholars to join the faith shows that no such research was ever done, by anyone, before converting—nor is there any clear example of such research being engaged *after* converting, either (which corroborates the findings of Chapter 17 that no such principles of inquiry were even promoted by the Church). Indeed, the one fact Holding observes—the social obsession with moral propriety—leads more to the *opposite* conclusion: those who demonstrated themselves to be morally just were perceived as honest and trustworthy, and as a result their word could be sufficient in itself to persuade. Holding also says that "whenever we go back to the key texts for evidence of why they persisted in such an improbable and dangerous belief they answer: it is because Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead." But that was their *belief*, not the evidence offered for that belief. Yes, many persisted in believing this against all manner of threats and difficulties, but there is no evidence this confidence was the product of careful empirical research—and plenty of evidence it was the product of irrational, superstitious thinking instead.

In contrast to all the evidence I've assembled above, what does Holding offer? Nothing relevant at all. He completely misses the difference, for example, between scriptural and empirical evidence when

he argues that “if the Pharisees checked Jesus on things like handwashing and grain picking” then “how much more would things like a claimed resurrection have been looked at!” But none of these examples pertain to researching claims or checking empirical evidence. Jesus does not provide the Pharisees with empirical evidence supporting his views on washing and gleaning. He simply argues from scripture and tradition. Thus, if we accept Holding’s own analogy, anyone convinced by Jesus on washing and gleaning would be convinced he rose from the dead on the very same evidence: quotations of scripture. And as we’ve seen, that’s clearly the evidence that counted. At the same time, when Holding appeals to the fact that “large crowds gathered around Jesus each time he so much as sneezed,” this tells us nothing about what they did to test the claim of the *resurrection*—which conveniently none of them saw, despite the fact that they otherwise “gathered around Jesus each time he so much as sneezed.” When he sneezed...but not when he rose from the dead? Maybe the crowds had their priorities all out of whack. More likely, Holding is just spouting another *non sequitur* in defense of his irrational case for Christianity. When it comes to the resurrection, all we can establish from the Epistles and Acts, and the earliest elite scholars, was that converts required no other evidence but Scripture, and the words and deeds of the Apostles. Of those in the same period whom we know had any higher standards than that, none became Christians.

14. Who Would Follow an Ignorant Savior?

James Holding argues that “if you want a decent deity, you have to make him fully respectable,” yet “ignorance of future or present events” (like “not knowing the day or hour of his return” or “not knowing who touched him in a crowd”) is embarrassing and would be a big hurdle to overcome in selling Jesus as God.[396] This is by far Holding’s weakest argument. He never proves this was a problem in the first hundred years of Christian preaching. Indeed, he doesn’t even establish that the statements in question were at all widely known even among Christians in the first century, much less an element of any conversion speech, even less an objection anyone raised until *elite scholars* took notice in the 2nd century. Those same elite scholars attacked all popular religions for exactly the same reasons: the precious myths the common people believed about their gods depicted those gods as exhibiting human weaknesses, including ignorance of things they should have known. Obviously, though this annoyed elite scholars, it was never any barrier to the success of widespread belief in these gods. So why should it have been a problem for Christians?

That’s already sufficient to nullify Holding’s point. But there is a further problem worth discussing: Holding doesn’t take into account the probability of evolution in Christian ideology. When the sayings of Jesus first began to circulate, the early Christians probably had a very different conception of who he was than Christians a century later did. As already discussed in Chapter 9, the earliest Christians might not have believed

Jesus was literally God, and even insofar as they thought him divine, they appear to have regarded his divine attributes as coming to him only *after* his death (e.g. Romans 1:4, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:43), not while he was still alive. Mark even appears to deny it (in Mark 10:18, 13:32, and elsewhere). And only *once* does any Pauline letter directly call him God (Romans 9:5), rather than a son, king, or intermediary between man and God, and that one direct attribution could be a later scribal interpolation. The fact that it's unique in the Pauline corpus suggests this, as does the fact that magnifying the Christological titles of Jesus, especially adding the appellation "God" (*Theos*), is one of the most commonly documented interpolations, with numerous examples in extant manuscripts. But even if authentic, it still only refers to Jesus after his death, not during his ministry. Likewise, the first (and possibly authentic) letter of Clement of Rome, believed to have been written at the end of the first century, never claims Jesus was literally identical with God, but always portrays Jesus as a chosen intermediary.

So it cannot be confidently proven that in the early days of the Christian mission Jesus was thought to share in the omniscience of God, any more than any other prophet did. Thus, a few sayings suggesting his ignorance would present no barrier to believing that Jesus was the Chosen One of God, Lord and King of Kings, Anointed Son of God, and so on. For Jesus was not expected to share all the divine attributes during his days on earth, until much later in Christian history. Indeed, logic suffices to make the point: obviously Jesus did not possess God's attribute of *omnipresence*. Therefore, there is no logical reason why Jesus could not have lacked other omnible attributes. In other words, to argue that Jesus could not be God because he wasn't omniscient is no more logical than arguing that Jesus could not be God because he wasn't omnipresent. Anyone unimpressed by the latter argument would be equally unimpressed by the former argument. And Christianity only won over those who were suitably unimpressed by such highbrow nitpicking.

Likewise, Holding's only evidence is the fact that the Gospels suggest Jesus might not have known some things, and depict him showing "weakness." But this is not relevant to what the Christians were actually saying about Jesus from the beginning. The entire purpose of God's incarnating and taking on flesh was to suffer.[397] This is clear throughout the Epistles. His death could not logically atone if he could not physically

suffer, and therefore signs of weakness (including weakness of mind) would be necessary to God's plan, not indications against the divinity of Jesus. It would be meaningless (in fact, heretical) to believe Jesus took on a human body that was indestructible, all-powerful, and impervious to pain. Nor did most pagans believe such things even of their own incarnated gods (as discussed in Chapter 9). To the contrary, to be incarnated meant to them, as it did to the Christians, that a god voluntarily (or, often, by fate of birth) took on many of the weaknesses of flesh, until shedding that flesh and adopting once again the true divine body (as Christ did at his resurrection).

Ultimately, Holding fails to prove any obstacle was created for the Christian mission in its first hundred years by these details of the Gospels. Nor does he show that these details were widely known even within the Christian community, or that they played any role when persuading anyone to convert. He also doesn't show that Christians in the first hundred years even taught that Jesus was literally identical to God, sharing *all* the divine attributes during his sojourn on Earth—which means Holding can't even demonstrate that prospective converts would have been bothered by a Divine Man who shared in human weaknesses. To the contrary, the Christians were preaching that he *had* to share in these weaknesses for his salvation to work its magic. Only as Christianity grew more distant from its Jewish roots, and aspired more toward winning over more studious elites, did the role of Jesus as "suffering servant" recede into the background, and the need to build him up as a superman came to the forefront. But by then it was too late. There would be no way to check. But even then, most people would have no difficulty, just as most had no difficulty worshipping pagan gods with similar foibles.

15. Who Would Follow an Executed Criminal?

Not much needs to be said about Holding's next point, which simply duplicates what he already argued earlier: that "Jesus endured disgrace—and thereby also offended the sensibilities of his contemporaries" by being mocked and humiliated by the authorities, convicted of blasphemy and sedition, and buried dishonorably as a convicted felon. I already addressed these issues quite thoroughly in Chapters 1 and 2, so there's no need for repetition. The bottom line: Christians taught that Jesus was completely innocent, and received all this treatment unjustly—but voluntarily—exactly as scripture required. Such a message had genuine appeal to many groups, even as it remained repugnant to still other groups, especially many among the elite. Consequently, exactly as Hol-ding's argument entails, Christianity succeeded only among those groups who were receptive to its message, and failed to find favor among those groups who found such a messiah beneath their contempt. But there were more than enough people in the former category to fully account for the actual scale of Christian success in the first century (which I'll discuss in Chapter 18). So there was nothing "improbable" about Christianity's success on this score.

16. Were Christian Teachings Too Radical?

Fallacies Galore

Holding then throws in a hodgepodge of miscellaneous difficulties we might categorize under the general argument that "Christian teachings were too radical to be popular." That may be true—after all, Christianity wasn't, in fact, popular. In its first century, its scale of success was so small it was barely even noticed—as I'll prove in Chapter 18. For now it's enough to note that the Christians themselves routinely admitted they were a small, oppressed, and misunderstood minority, even after a hundred years of earnest preaching and recruitment. Thus, there's no need to explain some universal "popularity" of Christianity, because there was no such thing. Rather, what requires explanation is the attraction of Christianity to those few who flocked to it despite the distrust or condemnation of their peers. And I've already answered different elements of this question in nearly every chapter so far. But this little hodgepodge remains

Some of Holding's grab bag of objections are simply nonsense. For instance, "the theme of being 'born again' was a real shocker," Holding claims—indeed, "preaching a 'new birth' would have been inconceivable!" This is a typical foot-in-mouth kind of statement from a modern Christian who makes no effort to actually study ancient culture and check his own assertions against the evidence. For in actual fact, far from being "inconceivable," rebirthing was a widely accepted symbol in pagan mystery religion—that is surely a major reason why the Christians adopted it. For example, Apuleius gives us a detailed account of the ceremony of initiation into the cult of Isis and Osiris, which was one of the most popular religions of the day: the initiation, he tells us, resembles a "voluntary death" (*instar voluntariae mortis*) after which one is "reborn" (*renatus*). After you are baptized into the cult, the day of initiation became a new "birthday" and the priest who initiated you became your new father.[398] As Apuleius describes the ritual, "I approached the border of death, and once the threshold of Proserpina was crossed, I was conveyed through all the elements, and came back" to life (Proserpina is of course the Goddess of the Underworld, and as such is a personification of the

Land of the Dead, and hence of death itself).[399] All of which he again calls a "rebirth."[400] So much for all this being shocking and inconceivable. To the contrary, it was a popular idea!

Some of Holding's notions are dubious. For example, he argues that "for Jesus to say [the Temple] would be destroyed, and by pagans at that, would have been profoundly offensive to many Jews," yet it was Jews who predicted that very fate in their own sacred scripture: see Daniel 9:26. Why would it be okay for the Prophet Daniel to predict this, but not the Prophet Jesus? Holding's argument here makes no sense. What's worse, many scholars reject these statements by Jesus as having been added after the Temple was actually destroyed, and thus not originally spoken by Jesus, which completely moots Holding's argument, even if we could make sense of it. Likewise, in some cases Christians saw these remarks as having nothing to do with the actual Temple anyway (John 2:18-22), and regarded its literal interpretation as a *slander* and *not* what Jesus really meant (Mark 14:57-59). If that were so, then the remark could only be "offensive" to those who didn't inquire as to its meaning—but all converts surely would have, so it would present no barrier. Maybe one can debate some of these issues, but the fact remains that they are not resolved to any sort of consensus among experts, and so no strong argument can be built on such a point.

Some of Holding's arguments are circular. He asks, for example, "Why did the early Christians make such a bold political stand part of their established belief system?" and finds the only answer to be, "They must have truly believed that Jesus was the Lord of this world, and that His resurrection from the dead proved it." Indeed! *By definition* all Christians believed Jesus was Lord because he was raised from the dead. That's what it meant to be a "Christian." Of course, as Malina & Neyrey explain, not all Christians would necessarily have to *really* believe this in order to find the movement worth every sacrifice. They could merely *profess* to believe it in order to support and promote its superior cultural agenda (see Chapter 10). But even if they 'really' believed, the fact that Christians believed this still cannot be used as proof it was true. That's circular reasoning—for it begs the question whether their belief was *justified*, by any respectable modern standard. Perhaps Holding means that Christians couldn't have locked horns with their peers and authorities in such a bold culture-war if they were merely "pretending" to believe.

That’s debatable (as noted above). But we could concede the point happily —for even Holding must admit that many Muslims *really believe* martyrs gain paradise, that many Hindus *really believe* they will be reincarnated, and so on, yet their belief is false. Thus, Christians could certainly throw themselves pell-mell into a dangerous culture-war because of a false belief. The issue is whether their belief was *false*, not whether it was *sincere*.

Misrepresenting Malina—Again

Holding also misrepresents here the arguments of Malina and Rohrbaugh. For example, though he quotes them saying "departure from the family was something morally impossible in a society where the kinship unit was the focal social institution," he curiously fails to mention that they go on to explain how Christianity offered an even better family to be loyal to and thus *fulfilled* the expectations of their society—proclaiming to do so, in fact, *better* than existing social institutions (as I already discussed in Chapters 6 and 10):

> The household or family provided the early Jesus-group members with one of their basic images of social identity and cohesion. It is important, therefore, to understand what fam-ily meant to ancient people. In the Mediter-ranean world of antiquity the extended family meant everything ... Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of ... vital [social] networks as well as any connection to the land. Loss of family was the most serious loss one could sustain.
>
> Yet a surrogate family, what anthro-pologists call a fictive kin group, *could serve the same functions as a family of biological origin*. Jesus groups, acting as surrogate families, are the locus of the good news for all the Gospel writers. It quickly transcended the normal categories of birth, social status, education, wealth, and power ... Followers of Jesus are "brothers." For those *already detached from their families of origin* (for example, noninheriting sons who go to the city), a surrogate family could become a place of genuine refuge.
>
> For the *well-connected*, particularly among the *city elite*, giving up one's family of origin for the surrogate Jesus-group family, as the Gospels portray Jesus demanding, was a decision that could cost one dearly ... It meant breaking ties not only with family but also the entire social network of which one had been a part. Yet, as Jesus promises in Mark 10:30, *the rewards could be unimaginably great*: "a hundredfold *now in this age* and, in the age to come, eternal life."[401]

This is exactly what I've argued throughout my critique: Christianity was rarely appealing to the successful and well-connected elite, but was often appealing to many lower down the ladder whose social circumstances were unsatisfying—like "noninheriting sons" and those who migrate to cities in search of a better life—and these people, Malina says, would find joining the Christian family to be quite attractive, not "impossible" as Holding misrepresents him as arguing.

Of course, in actual practice, Christians rarely asked people to depart from their families anyway, and often sought to recruit heads of household first so the rest of the family would follow (see Chapters 6, 10, and 18). Indeed, on every point Holding quotes them on, Malina and Rohrbaugh say much more than he lets on. They don't agree with Holding at all that these radical ideas (which were not unique to Christianity—similarly radical proposals were advanced by various religious sects and philosophical schools) could not have won converts without "irrefutable" empirical evidence. To the contrary, Malina and Rohrbaugh's message, throughout all their commentaries, is that Christianity found a following because its progressive moral vision was actually appealing—it purported (and in many cases genuinely appeared) to solve real social problems. Holding will search Malina and Rohrbaugh in vain for any argument that *evidence* was a factor in Christianity's *actual success*. But they do remark in one way or another on the attractiveness of the Christian *moral message* as the real key to its success, at least among those groups who were desperately eager for some solution to the failures of their own social institutions.

This one-sided use of Malina and Rohrbaugh exposes the most pervasive error Holding makes: most of his observations miss the entire point of a culture-war in the first place. For example, Holding argues that the "teachings and attitudes of Jesus and early Christianity" were "contrary to what was accepted as normal in the first century," but that isn't exactly true—ancient society was highly cosmopolitan, with numerous different cultures and value systems intermingling and living together and competing for allegiance. One man's "normal" was another man's anathema. Accordingly, in many ways Christianity gained an audience because it opposed certain values among the elite that were often despised by outsiders as producing a dysfunctional, unjust society. Obviously the elite didn't think so, which is why almost none of them joined up. Yet in other respects, Christianity actually *appealed* to popular values, religious

beliefs, and cultural symbols and expectations—it was deliberately sold as their truest realization, against the corruption and failure of other religious sects. Both tactics are proven winners in the game of cultural warfare. So there should be no surprise that Christianity won many adherents.

Holding doesn't seem to grasp the multiculturalism of antiquity, or the nuances of just what the Christians were actually arguing. "Think of how people react when someone burns Old Glory," he asks, offering this as an example of radical behavior that breeds cultural outrage. But somehow he manages to forget the fact that there are a lot of people who don't care whether someone burns the flag (in fact, most people don't), and still a lot who see it as symbolically appropriate, and even many who actually cheer the flames. That's why the flag is burned. Thus Holding is engaging in yet another hasty generalization, pretending everyone was exactly alike in their values and beliefs, when in fact the Roman world, just like modern America, was awash with battles between numerous conflicting cultural values.

Even then, most of the ancient culture-war, again just like today, wasn't *really* a clash of different values, but a clash of different perceptions of whether those values were actually being realized. Most flag burners within the United States are patriots: they burn the flag to protest the fact that the present government is not living up to the very values it professes to serve. The same holds for any contemporary issue you care to mention—whether it's war, capital punishment, abortion, school prayer—in every case, there really isn't a difference in *values*, for both sides profess to value life, compassion, liberty, freedom from oppression, and equality before the law. Rather, there is only a difference in *perception*: one side says the other's behavior violates their *own* values —for life, compassion, liberty, freedom from oppression, or equality before the law. So it was in antiquity: Jesus and the early Christians believed and preached that their apparently "radical" behavior and teachings were actually a *fulfillment* of the ordinary and beloved values of the wider society, and that what others in that society *thought* was fulfilling those values was actually trampling and destroying them. It was a debate. Some cried poppycock. Some rubbed their chins and nodded. Some cheered. Christians simply recruited from the cheering section.

So, for example, it's certainly true the Christian movement was an attempt to supplant the Jewish Temple cult, as Holding details. Indeed, the

Christians were not shy about this: their language on the matter was explicit. It was, in fact, their primary message. Many other Jewish sects also attempted exactly this—the Samaritans, for example, as well as the sect that authored the texts discovered near Qumran. But that was because the Temple cult, and the system it entailed, was seen by many as a major cause of society's problems. I've elaborated on this point elsewhere.[402] Here it's enough to cite the fact that the Temple cult was perceived by many as commercialized and hypocritical, and it had become a focal point of violence. Thus it was a major social problem. So to get rid of it was already seen by many as a viable solution—to those who were locked outside of the system that controlled it. Insiders—like the Pharisees and Judaean Rabbis—were appalled, of course. But that's a typical elite response to popular unrest. Citing how shocked the elite were tells us nothing of how the discontented masses felt about the matter.

Conclusion

And that's really the most important point here. Holding can certainly claim that, in one way or another, Christian teachings "would have shocked most" listeners, but that only serves to explain the actual fact that "most listeners" didn't become Christians. Even by the middle of the 2nd century, after a hundred-plus years of vigorous missionary activity establishing hundreds of churches throughout the Roman Empire, the Church still only comprised less than 1% of the Empire's population (see Chapter 18), which means *even then* 99 out of 100 people (and that's certainly "most") *rejected the Christian message*. The few who accepted it did so because they approved of its anti-elitist message in all the ways I've already explored here and in previous chapters.

Flag burners in the United States serve as a good parallel: their numbers and motivations are largely the same—a tiny minority who believe the larger society has failed to live up to its own values. Ultimately, Holding cannot offer the fact that "by far most" *rejected* Christianity as evidence that Christianity had "irrefutable proof" that Jesus rose from the dead, any more than I could offer the fact that "by far most" reject the efficacy of flag burning as evidence that flag burners have "irrefutable proof" that flag burning is effective. Nor can he claim that the tiny minority who were persuaded converted *only* because the proof of this was irrefutable—for there were numerous other motives available, and as we've seen in several past chapters, the evidence shows those other motives were operating, fully explaining the actual scale of Christianity's success.

17. Did Christians Encourage Critical Inquiry?

Holding's Bogus Evidence

Holding claims that "throughout the [New Testament], the apostles encouraged people to check" and "seek proof and verify facts." This is blatantly false. Indeed, the only evidence he can adduce for this absurd claim has nothing to do with "facts" and actually implies the *opposite* attitude toward method that Holding intends. Holding begins his case with 1 Thessalonians 5:21, which says (in the context of 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22): "Do not extinguish the Spirit, do not scoff at acts of prophesy, but put them to the test, and hold fast to what's good, and push away every kind of knavish thing." Is Paul talking about checking the evidence for the resurrection? Or in fact *any* empirical claim? No. He is talking about testing ongoing prophesies in the Church (ordinary converts would prophesy as a standard Church practice at the time), and the test he refers to is not empirical, but moral: believe any prophesy that's morally *good*, and shun any prophesy that's morally *bad*.[403] That kind of test isn't even relevant to Holding's argument.

This test is the same described or alluded to by other New Testament writers (see, for example, 1 John 4:1-5:13 and 2 Peter 1:19-2:22). *No other test* (for distinguishing true from false prophesy) is ever mentioned in the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew has Jesus himself describe and promote this "moral" test for prophesy: the sole criterion is whether the prophesy produces good or evil fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). No mention is made of doing empirical research or logical analysis or anything like that. To the contrary, Christians are told that false prophets will come bearing all the same evidence true prophets will (see Matthew 24:23-29 and Mark 13:21-23), therefore only a moral test will tell them apart. The assumption is that false prophesy produces lawlessness and abandonment of love (Matthew 24:11-12). This reflects the irrational groupthink assumption that a well-behaved man can't lie and a morally successful group must have the approval of God (see again Chapters 6 and 10). The only exception in the New Testament is when a false prophet is exposed the same way Moses proved the greatness of his God: in a contest of miracles (Acts 13:6-12)—not by researching or logically analyzing what he claims,

but simply by seeing whose miracles work. Period. No other evidence or investigation ever comes up, or is at all required to convert even an elite (like Sergius Paulus: see Chapter 13).

Indeed, in the most explicit instruction, John uses the same vocabulary as Paul when he tells Christians to "test" prophetic spirits by seeing whether they promote or stifle 'love'. Indeed, his test is absurdly question-begging: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God, but is the spirit of the Antichrist" (1 John 4:1-3). As standards of inquiry go, this hits rock bottom. The only further test subsequently offered is the criterion of whether the spirit promotes love or worldly desires (1 John 4:4-5:13), since only the former comes from God. It's impossible to accept any of these tests as evidence today. Whether someone in a prophetic trance confesses Christ and advocates love has no bearing at all on whether Jesus really rose from the dead. Indeed, the mere fact that these tests were more than sufficient for Christian converts proves *exactly the opposite* of Holding's point: they were clearly satisfied with far, far less than anything we would call "irrefutable" evidence. So long as people had visions of a Christ telling them to love each other and give up worldly lusts, that was enough to prove Christ lived. Maybe they would require a missionary to perform some miracle before being truly convinced (as discussed in Chapter 13, for example). But the Christians themselves admitted that even false prophets could do that! Therefore, empirical evidence was inadequate. Only the moral (and thus, as we know, thoroughly natural) success of the movement really counted.

The only other piece of evidence Holding has to offer is just as fatal to his case. Holding claims that "when fledgling converts heeded this advice" to check the facts, "not only did they remain converts (suggesting that the evidence held up under scrutiny), but the apostles described them as 'noble' for doing so," citing Acts 17:11. But that passage says the opposite of what Holding thinks: it says these "nobler" Christians accepted the gospel "readily" ("with all willingness"), *not* skeptically. And it says the *only* test they conducted, the *only* research they engaged, and the *only* fact-checking they carried out was "closely examining the scriptures on a daily basis" as to "whether these things were so," and *from that alone* "many of them therefore believed, and many among the respectable Greek women, too, as well as not a few of the men" (Acts 17:12). That's it. They

checked scripture. And that was enough to persuade them to convert—on the spot. Not a single bit of actual research was required, nor was any engaged. No letters were sent. No inquiries made. No empirical evidence demanded. There wasn't even an interrogation of the apostles as witnesses—to the contrary, their stories were "eagerly" believed, and as soon as what they said matched what the scriptures said, that was sufficient to convert everyone who did convert, even "respectable" men and women. And *this* is what Acts praises as most noble—*not* skeptical inquiry as we understand it.

All the evidence from Acts and beyond corroborates this same picture, as demonstrated already in Chapter 13. So even if we completely trust what Acts says, it still proves exactly the opposite of what Holding argues: no empirical research of any kind was required or undertaken, even by wealthy converts, and in fact Christians were hailed as especially "noble" who simply "accepted" the message, confirming no more than that it agreed with scripture. Just as the Gospel of John says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed, but *blessed are those who have not seen*, and yet believe" (John 20:29). The greater praise, in other words, went to those who *rejected* the skeptical standards of Thomas and simply trusted what they were told (see my discussion of Hebrews in Chapter 8). That entails a hierarchy of empirical values quite the reverse of what Holding pretends.

Method as Revealed in Paul

That concludes all the evidence Holding can find. There is no other evidence. And even these two passages utterly fail to support his point, but in fact the reverse. As it happens, like these passages, the collective evidence of the New Testament, especially in the Epistles, supports quite the opposite conclusion. Never once is anyone "encouraged" to "check," "seek proof," or "verify facts" at all. No empirical method or standard of critical inquiry gains any praise. To the contrary, those who advocated such methods (and the principles of reasoned doubt and investigation) are pretty much on the receiving end of condemnation. Christianity, after all, targeted for conversion those who scorned the "wisdom of the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:17-31), not those who cherished the forensic standards of the super-educated lawyers, historians, and scientists of the day.

And this is born out in evident practice, as Paul could demonstrate any point he wanted by simply articulating a clever proof from scripture. Failing that, all he had to do was claim a revelation from God. No other evidence really mattered. At most, if he really needed some further corroboration, he would appeal to the fact that he suffers for the faith, therefore he "must" be telling the truth, and he can perform "miracles," therefore God "must" approve what he says. Try as you might, search every verse, and not once is any other kind of evidence offered for any claim he makes, beyond "appearances" like his own revelatory vision. These are not fact-checkers. These are mystics. And the standards of mystics are wholly alien to any respectable empiricism.

Read the Epistles and see. Paul and his audience do not seem very impressed by rational, historical, scientific, or dialectical evidence (check out 1 Corinthians 2, for instance), so these get no significant mention in his letters. Instead, Paul always 'proves' the truth by appealing to the efficacy of apostolic miracle-working, to subjective revelation, to scripture, and to his upstanding behavior or 'suffering' as proof of his sincerity.[404] That's pretty much it. After all, Paul and his flock believed 'truth' had to be grasped spiritually, on faith (1 Corinthians 2:15-16), not through skeptical investigation. Consider the argument of Galatians:

> I am amazed that you are so quickly aban-doning the one who called you in the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, which isn't really another gospel, except there are some people who trouble you, and would pervert the gos-pel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you any gospel other than what we preached to you, let him be anathema! As we have said before, so I now say again, *if any man preaches to you any gospel other than that which you received, let him be anathema*.[405]

Here we have a serious situation: Christians are abandoning the faith for some alien gospel. Surely here, of all places, Paul would pull out all the stops in emphasizing the proper empirical methods for checking the truth of what Jesus really said and did, and hence what the true gospel really was. Yet what do we get? A question-begging criterion of blind dogmatism: anything you hear that contradicts what we told you is false. Period. No fact-checking required. Even a vision from heaven won't cut it! Paul is so adamant about this criterion that he repeats it twice. This is clearly *the* criterion of truth he and his congregation should and do employ. Yet it's exactly the opposite of the empirical standards Holding wants to pretend Paul advocated.

Paul continues (emphasis mine):

> For I make known to you, brethren, regarding the gospel which was preached by me, that it is *not* according to a man, neither did I receive it from a man, nor was I taught it. Rather, it came to me through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my manner of life in time past in the Jewish religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the Church of God, and made havoc of it: and I advanced in the Jewish religion beyond many of my own age among my countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my moth-er's womb, and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles, right away I did not consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go over to Jerusalem to those who were Apostles before me.[406]

Think about this argument for a minute. Paul is surely using the best argument he knows will persuade his audience, and get them back into the fold—so we can say his audience must have found this line of reasoning more persuasive than anything else he could think to say. But his line of reasoning is the exact flip-side of empirical standards: whereas a good critical thinker would *only* trust a man who immediately went and checked all the facts before believing, Paul not only explicitly declares he did *not* do that *at all*, but the fact that he *didn't* is actually his very argument! In other words, he expects his audience to be *impressed* by the fact that he *didn't* fact-check! So important is this point that he actually goes out of his way to insist, "I'm not lying!" (Galatians 2:20).

Thus, Galatians 2 expresses values exactly the opposite of what Holding wants. Paul and his audience are thoroughly uninterested in Holding's idea of "fact-checking." To the contrary, the testimony of men, indeed even of angels, is inherently suspect—so suspect, in fact, that they can dogmatically reject it *a priori*. What is persuasive is simply and only this: that God spoke to Paul in a private revelation. That is the only kind of evidence his audience will accept. Indeed, even so much as a *hint* that Paul checked the facts before believing the vision would destroy Paul's credibility. For if he showed any doubt at all that the vision was true, if the vision was so insufficient that he had to seek reinforcement or additional instruction from mortal men, then this would cast doubt on the vision being an authentic communication from God. After all, his audience were the sort of people who thought God punished Zacharias (by striking him mute) for merely *asking* for evidence (Luke 1:18-20). That's how hostile the Christian mind was to Holding's dream of "fact-checking." The Christian moral was that Zacharias, and hence all of us, should simply trust a vision—no questions asked, and no facts checked. The same twisted logic also makes sense of Paul's tactic of pointing out how he did a total 180 from enemy to friend, as proof that his vision must really have been from God. The fallacious logic here would impress many people back then. But we have no good reason to buy it today.

Survey of Passages Relating to Method

Paul's bizarre anti-empirical assumptions reflect the fact that Christian epistemology was fundamentally centered on faith over evidence. For "the righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17, quoting Habakkuk 2:4) and so "we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). This is an attitude that offers little encouragement to "checking the facts first." To the contrary, when questions arise, far from being encouraged to fact-check, the Christian is told to "ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind," and "such a man cannot expect to receive anything from the Lord, since he is a man of two minds, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8). Ask *in faith*. Ask *without doubting*. The man who doubts is aimless, unstable, and worthy of no help from God. This is exactly the opposite of encouraging critical inquiry. Such an image of skepticism quite clearly *discourages* it.

Far from being told to check things out, the Christian is told "you have no need for anyone to teach you" because Christ "teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie, and just as this has taught you, you abide in him" (1 John 2:27). In fact, don't even pay attention to what anyone else says, just what we tell you, for "we are of God, and he who knows God understands us, while he who is not of God doesn't understand." That was their criterion of truth, "by this we know the spirit of truth" and can distinguish it from "the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6). This is dogmatism, not empiricism. Fact-checking is portrayed here as all but ungodly. Instead, 'Believe what we say'. End of story. That's indeed the only criterion implied in 1 Corinthians 15:11: after reciting the claims grounding the faith, Paul does not mention any facts having been checked or needing to be checked; all he says is "so we preach, and so you believed." That's considered enough.

At the same time, the principles of philosophy, science, logic, and forensics are lambasted as foolish. People who rely on them "become futile in their speculations," and though "professing to be wise," they are really just "fools" (Romans 1:21-22). Christians are openly discouraged from learning, developing, and employing skills of interrogation,

investigation, and examination—all the tools of "the wise." Anyone who attempts to do that merely "deceives himself," for such things are "foolishness before God." In fact, "it is written" that "the reasoning of the wise" is "useless," that God "will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring the discernment of the discerning to naught"—making fools of "the wise man," "the scribe," and "the skilled questioner" (1 Corinthians 1:18-20 & 3:18-20). This isn't exactly an encouragement to follow in the footsteps of philosophers, scholars, and skilled inquirers.

Indeed, Christians are specifically told to reject logical analysis, since "wrangling over words" is "useless" and brings only ruin (2 Timothy 2:14), and it's all "fruitless discussion" anyway. Whoever entangle themselves in it "neither understand what they are saying nor grasp the matters about which they make confident assertions" (1 Timothy 1:6-7). Examining alternative accounts and claims is discouraged, too:

> If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing, having a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.[407]

Thus, the very sort of person who asks questions, seeks precision in description and terminology, or even suggests the truth is other than what the Christian leaders say it is, is just plain evil. How can you check any facts, when any fact contrary to dogma is automatically a lie, born only of evil, arrogance, ignorance, and greed?

So fact-checking is practically ruled out *a priori*. Anything contrary to the "knowledge of God" and "obedience to Christ" must be destroyed (2 Corinthians 10:3-6). Not checked. Not looked into. Just destroyed. All mundane knowledge is suspect: "if anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:2). And the cure is not employing some critical method to gain reliable knowledge, but to simply reject everything contrary to dogma. The Christian is simply told to "make sure no one makes a captive of you through philosophy and senseless deception according to the tradition of

men, according to the basic principles of the natural world, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

In fact, the earliest Christians conveniently construc-ted an epistemology whereby any evidence or testimony that contradicts their dogmatic beliefs could be rejected out of hand. Anyone who says anything contrary to the claims of the Apostles is surely deluded, "for God has sent upon them a deluding influence so they would believe what is false" (2 Thessalonians 2:11), and they are all hypocrites, liars, victims of deluding spirits, and the puppets of demons (1 Timothy 4:1). Christians are even told, point blank: don't debate (Galatians 5:20-26), even though debate is the lifeblood of critical inquiry. Likewise, instead of checking out the facts and developing well-researched refutations, "false teachers" are simply to be "shunned" (2 Timothy 3:5), and so anything contrary to dogma won't even be heard—much less looked into. As Timothy is instructed, "guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20-21). In other words, trust what you were told. Don't even listen to anyone else. Rather than being told to investigate, Christians are instructed to simply reject what stories they may hear (1 Timothy 4:7).

One can certainly try to sugarcoat all this, spin it to one's liking, make excuses, and ultimately argue that these declarations only apply to certain contexts, or whatever. Such ploys still won't change the fact that these are the *only* encouragements regarding method to be found in the Epistles. And not a one encourages anyone to "check the facts." Instead, when we catch glimpses of the actual methods that Christians respected, we find mysticism trumping empiricism every time. Consider Paul's moving appeal:

> When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom when I proclaimed to you the testimony of God. ... My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in a demon-stration of the spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.[408]

Thus, Paul openly disavows the established rhetorical principles of evidence and argument, and says instead that the miracles of the Holy Spirit are all he came with, and all that God *wants* Christians to trust as evidence. Miracles and revelations and the Apostle's word were always sufficient. No research was necessary, for "the Lord will give you understanding in everything."[409] Like modern New Agers (as discussed in Chapter 7), Christians are exhorted to ignore the evidence of their senses, and trust instead in the invisible certainties of their heart (2 Corinthians 4:18), since that is where God speaks to you (as corroborated by the example from Hebrews discussed in Chapter 8). Indeed, Paul gives away the game when he says "what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of [inspired] knowledge or of prophecy or of doctrine?" (1 Corinthians 14:6). Funny how "evidence" and "logic" don't make the list. Paul is saying outright that if a claim doesn't come by revelation, prophecy, inspiration (*gnôsis*), or tradition, it's profitless and not even worth mentioning. So much for fact-checking.

Apart from Scripture, the Holy Spirit is their only sourcebook:

> For to one of us God grants the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge (*gnôsis*) according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another workings of power, and to another prophecy, and to another interpret-ations of spirits, to another different kinds of utterances, and to another the interpretation of these utterances.[410]

Wisdom. Knowledge. Faith. All come from the Holy Spirit. Not from research. Not from making inquiries. Not from questioning witnesses accurately and weighing different kinds of testimony. Indeed, when Paul declares the hierarchy of reverence, the list goes: "first Apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, then the ability to help, then to administer, then varieties of speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28). Again, fact-checkers don't even make the list.

Christianity's earliest critic certainly noticed the problem, and it's well worth looking at what he said on this matter, and what the Christian apologist Origin had to say in reply—even though all this comes two hundred years late. When Celsus attempted to investigate the claims and

doctrines of Christians, he kept running into this same wall: Christians would simply exclaim "Do not question, just believe!" They expected converts to simply trust in Jesus—without evidence or demonstration. And Origen doesn't deny it. To the contrary, he defends it! He says, point blank: "We admit that we teach those men to believe without reasons." So much for the supposed encouragement to "check the facts" first. And as Celsus' research attests, there was no reliable evidence anymore to check the facts by.

Origen does claim that Christians believe in inquiry into the meaning of their prophetical writings, the parables of the Gospels, and "other things narrated or enacted with a symbolical signification," but mentions nothing about checking witnesses, documents, physical evidence, histories, or anything empirical at all. And what's worse, not only is "study of scripture" the only inquiry Christians engage in, Origen declares that most people don't even have the time for *that* (since people worked long hours in antiquity just to get by), and "therefore" the Christian exhortation to "simply believe" is actually a good policy! So rather than refute or even challenge Celsus on this point, Origin *defends* the very anti-empirical policy we've found throughout the Epistles, on the dismal argument that faith is good for people.

By wasting no time on "fact-checking" before committing to the faith (or even afterward!), Origen argues, people can gain salvation and moral improvement. Origen even appeals to the "fact" that Christianity improves men's morals as sufficient proof that it's true—because no doctrine could do that unless God approved of it. This is the same pseudologic I've discussed in other chapters: from Origen's cultural point of view, to be good, and to be approved by God, are synonymous and inseparable. So good men can't lie, nor even be mistaken in their doctrines—for if they were, they would not be good. Vicious logic indeed. In contrast, Celsus advocates the view that we must "follow reason and a rational guide, since he who assents to opinions without following this course is very liable to be deceived." Notice how we never find any statement like this in the Bible. Instead, "isn't it better for them," Origen insists, "to believe without a reason, and then become reformed and improved," rather than "not to have allowed themselves to be converted on the strength of mere faith, but to have waited until they could give themselves to a thorough examination of the reasons?" Origen says it is

indeed better to “just believe,” because most people could never complete such an examination, and therefore would remain wicked and die unsaved. So it’s better they simply have faith, and not waste time checking the facts.[411] So much for Holding’s argument.

The Bankrupt Methods of J.P. Holding

In a desperate attempt to defend himself against all the damning evidence above, J.P. Holding engaged a raft of hasty and specious "reinterpretations" of various Bible verses in order to defend ancient Christian epistemology against what I just proved. Ironically, he accuses me of the abuses that in fact *he* engages in, rather than I. It's not necessary for me to examine every single case. I'll just survey the leading examples, which are sufficient to dismiss the rest of this exercise as unworthy of continuing, so thoroughly do they expose Holding's entire methodology as defective or even dishonest.

(1) He ignores the actual logic and context of passages when it suits him. For example, the meaning of 2 Corinthians 5:7 is clearly not what Holding says, as one can see by reading 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:11: this very definitely argues that we should trust in what we can't yet see *here and now*, not just in the future. Likewise, 1 Timothy 1:3-11 is not just about stories and genealogies, as Holding claims (though in fact these are the very things I'm saying they *should* have been told to investigate empirically, in order to confirm or refute them), but all other aspects of "doctrine" contrary to the teachings of Paul. Likewise, in its context, 2 Timothy 2:14-18 does not in fact support logical disputes that are "useful" as Holding implies, since, obviously, one cannot know whether disputes are useful if one is shunning them as instructed. Moreover, Paul's criterion for "use" here is clearly little more than 'agreement with Pauline doctrine' and not some objective standard that would allow a Christian, for example, to make logical distinctions that could challenge Paul's Gospel or disrupt his church.

(2) He is ignorant of the ancient cultural context. For example, when Holding asks where I see 'philosophy and science' in Romans 1:21-22, the answer lies in Romans 1:18-25: in Paul's day, it was the philosophers and scientists who catalogued and studied the evidence Paul refers to, and thus it was they who saw this evidence yet failed to recognize God in it, but promoted and supported polytheism instead. In fact, "those who profess to be wise" was a common and obvious reference to philosophers (who were

the scientists and logicians of antiquity). That these are the ones who "became futile in their thoughts" when examining the evidence of the natural world can thus *only* be a reference to the systems of natural philosophy that Paul's Gospel was competing with. He is certainly not attacking with this argument mere plumbers or snowcone vendors.

(3) He pretends irrelevant observations constitute rebuttals. For example, that James 1 is about "temptations" and "trials" that Christians face makes no difference to the fact that a general principle is proposed about how to face those trials that not only discourages doubt and inquiry, but actually argues that doubt *in general* is dangerous, and then applies this general observation to the particular case of "trials" (which would certainly have included temptations to leave the fold, thus including doubt itself as just such a temptation). Similarly, Holding thinks it's relevant that 2 Thessalonians 2:11 is directed to a particular case, when in fact the relevant point is *how that particular case is dealt with*, which provides evidence of the methods Christians embraced, which is confirmed by the sentiment expressed in 1 Timothy 4:1 as a general tactic for dealing with theories contrary to their own.

(4) And in my opinion, Holding simply outright lies. For example, he claims Galatians 5:19-26 "says nothing at all about debating" even though it has the word "debate" in it (*eris*), as well as "disagreements" (*dichostasiai*, from the verb *dichostateô*), and references to the common consequences of both: "factions" and "sectarian divisions" (*eritheiai* and *haireseis*), which both essentially meant "taking sides" in a debate. Here Paul obviously equates arguments (and taking positions threatening or contrary to church dogma) as fundamentally comparable to murder or adultery or any other sin ("debaters," as those who ask questions to discover the truth, i.e. the *syzêtêtês*, are similarly denounced in 1 Corinthians 1:20). That he saw such things as the destructive product of personal passions and ambitions is besides the point, or rather supports the point, since it was evidently hard for Paul to imagine criticism, questioning, or debate as something that could have sincere motives or useful ends.

All these tactics are evident in Holding's attempt to dismiss Colossians 2:8 as somehow being limited to only one single heresy. To the contrary, Paul begins with a general principle, and *then* applies that principle to a particular heresy (just read the whole of Colossians 2). He does *not* say

that this principle only holds for that single heresy. Indeed, such a concession would undermine the power of his argument. Paul clearly means to say that Christians should not allow themselves to be persuaded by *any* "philosophy" or "tradition of men" (*paradosin tôn anthrôpôn*, in context a clear reference to philosophical sects, as distinct from revealed doctrines of God) or anything based on "the elements of the cosmos" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*), which had a double meaning in antiquity: the *stoicheia* in Greek are not only whatever physical elements the whole world can be reduced to, but also the fundamental arguments upon which a system of philosophy is built (as in the *Elements* of Euclid's geometry). Paul then deploys this as a reason to reject certain heresies that employ these methods of persuasion (philosophies and their elements, in either sense). I'm not aware of any case where the word "elements" is clearly used to refer to stars, planets, or gods, as Holding and a few other scholars have claimed, but such a strange meaning would simply be a particular instance of Paul's general rule.

The same or similar arguments can be deployed against the remainder of Holding's examples here. Overall, in my experience he is dishonest and ignorant, employs irrelevancies to create the appearance of making an argument, and conveniently ignores both logic and context when a correct understanding of the text would refute him. But above all, the single most important point is that his tactic of making special exceptions for every passage is a fool's game. What makes more sense? In the light of *all* the passages I collect (and *all* the things that *could* have been said in the Bible and yet *aren't*), is it his interpretation or mine? Any one of these passages might not carry the point, but all of them together tend to support only one picture, and that picture isn't one of encouraging empirical research and inquiry, certainly not of the sort required to sustain Holding's argument for the resurrection of Jesus. Which is more probable? That a religion that promoted sound empirical methods never speaks of this and instead issues dozens of methodologically relevant statements that all just 'accidentally' appear to advocate the contrary? Or that these passages all resemble each other, and exclude proper skeptical and empirical values, because this religion did not endorse the latter, but endorsed instead values somewhere on the other side of good sense? You decide.

The Last Ditch

In a last ditch effort, Holding recruited an anonymous colleague (known only by his online handle ‘Jezz’) to argue that I’ve ignored the distinction between new converts and “established congregations,” and that it was the *former* who were asked to conduct empirical inquiry to confirm the resurrection claim, not the latter.[412] This is a bizarre objection on several levels.

First, I have argued there is no evidence of Christians encouraging such research *at all*. That remains a fact, as even Jezz had to admit: “I will grant that there is not a great deal of extant evidence supporting [Holding’s] point.” In fact, there is none—which is substantially less than ‘not a great deal’. Second, the examples I’ve given from Paul and John and other Epistles do not pertain to the resurrection, but to Christian research methodology in general (insofar as such methodology is mentioned at all). Hence, for example, when I note that Paul gives no empirical standard for testing prophecy (in 1 Thessalonians 5:21), you may recall I pointed out that he means *ongoing prophecies in the Church*. So there is no pertinent distinction here between “new converts” and “established congregations.” If Paul wanted existing congregations to test prophecies empirically, he would have said so. Instead, contrary to Jezz’s assumption, rather than citing or quoting Deuteronomy 18:21-22 in any way at all, Paul repeats the “moral test” that is explicitly elaborated in 1 John 4:1-5:13 and 2 Peter 1:19-2:22 (just as I said), and the basis for this shift was clearly the new thinking, later credited to Jesus, that even false prophets can provide the same empirical evidence as true ones (thus negating the use of the Deuteronomy rule).

Otherwise, evidence of Christians looking for the *wrong* empirical evidence (as I’ve given many examples of myself) is not relevant to the point of my argument here, which pertains to the historical research required to test the authenticity of the resurrection claim. One could just as well say “finding it in scripture” is an empirical method because the Bible is a physical book and you have to actually turn pages to find the evidence. Sorry, but as arguments go, that’s lame. Otherwise, every

attempt to claim that passages in Acts “imply” more research than is ever stated there is simply special pleading, and contrary to the overall evidence. The fact of the matter is that there are several places where an empirical standard of research could be mentioned or advocated, yet we hear *none*, not even once; and on every occasion where methods *are* mentioned, they appear quite the contrary—all with remarkable consistency. For example in Galatians 1 Paul could have listed all the empirical evidence his congregation already had confirming the authenticity of Paul’s message and gospel, but instead all he offers is a private revelation to himself. Even in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul never mentions the Corinthians having checked any of the facts he lists there, but says only that this is what he told them. An empiricist would emphasize the fact that his audience had checked. Paul emphasizes only that he told them so.

Try as you might, you won’t be able to conjure any evidence from the New Testament of sound empirical research being encouraged at all, certainly not of the kind Holding’s argument requires. One can try to ‘explain away’ isolated passages, but that still does not get you any evidence of such advocacy, and to conveniently explain away *so many* passages, and *such a pervasive* silence, begins to look absurd. Step back and observe the overall picture, and what you will see is not a community of empiricists and historical researchers, but mystics and scripturalists committed to fallacious reasoning and invalid forms of evidence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no evidence the Apostles were "actively encouraging people to check out their claims" in any sense we would find relevant today. To the contrary, as best we can tell, they were encouraging the *rejection* of the methods of critical and empirical inquiry advocated by elite scientists and philosophers, and instead advocating the pursuit of entirely different criteria of truth—criteria we know today are full of holes and incapable of actually getting at the real truth about anything (beyond blind luck). Their standards were mystical (appeals to scripture and revelation), moral (appeals to the virtues of the speaker as proof his story is true), and superstitious (appeals to the miraculous "powers" of the speaker as proof God agrees)—never anything validly empirical. This remained a pervasive focus of Christian epistemology, a fact I'll demonstrate and analyze more thoroughly (and compare with the very different epistemic values of the pagan elite) in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*. But already the case has been adequately made here.

Obviously, this won over no one who already valued the skeptical and empirical standards of the philosophical schools. But that's precisely why such people are condemned as fools. The Christians found favor instead with those who despised elite philosophy and cherished in its place entirely different standards of inquiry (as shown in Chapter 13), standards focused on God, spirituality, and moral development. And that's all the more reason why we can't much trust what the Christians claimed. By its very design Christianity excluded rational and critical minds, driving most of them away with every insult, while sucking in droves of what we would today call New Agers, people who prefer to "feel" their way to the truth through blind faith in dreams, oracles, and superstitious assumptions about God, man, and the universe. These were people who were annoyed with the uncertainties of real knowledge, and preferred to find refuge from the anxieties of doubt and the rigors of research by clinging to the absolute certainty of unquestioning faith. Their standards were incapable of ascertaining the truth—about anything, much less the resurrection of

Jesus. And for that reason we cannot conclude they would only have believed it if it was true. Indeed, from what we can see of their methods, that isn't even *likely*.

18. How Successful Was Christianity?

Assumptions

In previous chapters, I've sufficiently demonstrated that there was nothing improbable about Christianity's success—entirely natural factors that are attested in the evidence supply all the explanatory power needed to account for the actual course of history. I have not examined the issue beyond the first hundred years of the Christian mission, because after that period very little of J.P. Holding's argument remains relevant. The ability to check the facts would be, by then, all but impossible, and greatly thwarted by an overabundance of bogus history, while the nature of Christianity had substantially changed as well, as did the social circumstances surrounding it. As Holding himself admits, after the first century the "evidence would have been almost completely inaccessible and decisions had to be made on other grounds." Nevertheless, below I will address very briefly the next few centuries of Christian development, which secured its future as a major world religion (a fate that was never definite until the era of the Constantines).

But the central point of this final chapter is to address two underlying assumptions running throughout Holding's entire case. For one thing, he wrongly dismisses the role of luck in deciding the fate of nations and social movements. Holding is correct that we should not simply *assume* luck was a factor, nor declare luck as solely responsible. That has to be demonstrated, usually through appropriate counterfactual reasoning. And I shall demonstrate below that luck played a significant role in the *eventual* success of Christianity (i.e. its growth *after* the mid-2nd century A.D.).

But a far more important assumption in Holding's argument is that Christianity, right out of the gate, was as successful as sex in the sixties, winning over millions of people in just two or three generations. Holding never actually commits to any numbers, but many of his statements strongly imply (or once did, he keeps changing them) that Christianity was literally running away with Greco-Roman culture. After all, it makes no sense to argue that Christianity must have had supernatural backing "because most people wouldn't have bought it," when in fact most people

didn't. Surely Holding must be assuming that most people *did* buy it, or at least so many as to defy all natural expectation. I would have to say he must imagine Christianity won at least 10% of the population within a hundred years, or as much as 20% or more. That's patently absurd. But nothing else makes sense of many of his arguments.

I'm told Holding once admitted in an online debate that maybe only 1 in 5,000 'bought' Christianity in the first century, but if so that pretty much kills his case. Yet if so few bought it (indeed, *five hundred times fewer* than 1 in 10 people), even after a hundred years of sales, it can easily be said that Christianity was only appealing to the fringe radicals of the going culture. After all, pick any culture throughout history, and you'll easily find less than 1 in 10 members of that society following the beat of a different drummer. No conclusions about what the other 9 out of 10 would do will have any bearing on the response of the rest. And most of Holding's arguments amount to drawing conclusions about the other 9 out of 10, not the 1 in 10 who may have converted, *much less 1 in 5,000*. Thus, there is something fundamentally illogical about his entire case—unless he really does mean to imply that Christianity won over far more than even 10% of the population by at least the mid-2nd century.

But in reality, even 10% is an absurd estimate. In fact, the evidence is pretty clear (as we'll see below) that Christianity won over less than 1% of the population before the middle of the 2nd century. That means more than 99 out of 100 people weren't convinced, and less than 1 in 100 believed. It escapes me how anyone can claim this as a "supernatural" success. Even by their own account, for centuries Christians remained a small minority cult almost universally rejected or opposed, especially by the educated elite. Even its own country of origin rejected it almost universally, as Paul himself lets on in Romans 11:25-31. Judea, much less Jerusalem or Galilee, never became "Christian" to any notable degree until the 4th century—at the earliest.

Josephus records the history of these regions in considerable detail right up to the Jewish War (66-70 A.D.), yet Christians never once feature in the narrative of the war and the decades that led up to it—everyone encountered anywhere, either before or during the conflict, was either Jewish or pagan. His numerous digressions on the geography and demography of Palestine never mention them. His many digressions on Jewish sects never mention them. Even the one dubious passage that does

mention them says nothing of their numbers or location (and almost everyone agrees that passage is either largely or wholly a Christian interpolation and, in the form we have it now, not from Josephus himself).[413] Archaeological evidence secures the case: though a vast amount of material evidence has been uncovered of unmistakably Jewish occupation throughout Palestine, as well as considerable evidence of pagan inhabitants, absolutely *no* material evidence of any Christian population can be found there until later centuries. In fact, only in the 3rd century does material evidence of a Christian presence anywhere in the Empire begin to match that of even minor pagan cults. Therefore, from both observations it follows that if Christians inhabited Palestine in the first century, their numbers must have been truly negligible. And to carry the point home, even the most biased of Christian sources make no claims to the contrary. Acts suggests the mission was taken to the Gentiles because Jews simply weren't buying it anymore.[414] This looks pretty bad for Holding. Where Christianity was *most* open to being checked against the facts is where it was *least* successful. Hmmm.

Even taking in the compass of the whole Roman Empire, Holding himself quotes N.T. Wright that belief in Christ's resurrection "was held by a tiny group who, for the first two or three generations at least, could hardly have mounted a riot in a village, let alone a revolution in an empire." That's not an impressive rate of success. In fact, it's downright dismal. One might contrast this with the success of the Scientific Revolution, when modern scientific principles launched from a controversial fringe movement in the late 1500's to near-universal praise and acceptance from every echelon of society by the end of the 1600's. Christianity only wishes it had seen that kind of triumph. In the end, it could only gain that scale of success after numerous centuries, and even then only by force and intimidation (which notably the Scientific Revolution never required—no one had to be forced to adopt modern science, the evidence for its correctness and utility was *that* decisive).

From here on I'll ignore Holding's declaration that those who joined a Christian sect for completely insincere reasons, or those who joined Christian sects condemned in the New Testament, were not "real" Christians.[415] Otherwise, the number of "real" Christians would be far lower than the number of those who were "called" Christians, and therefore all evidence of the number of "Christians" will be useless to us.

And in any case, if “true” Christians are far fewer than even the numbers I estimate here, then *a fortiori*, Holding’s entire case is done for.

Numbers: What the Texts Say

There is no good evidence on the number of Christians in the first century. Acts neglects to mention or even estimate the rate of losses and has every reason to exaggerate the scale of Christianity's success (and greatly exaggerating numbers was a commonplace even in secular histories of the time), yet Acts still only claims the Church began with about 120 members after the death of Jesus (Acts 1:15), while the largest actual number on record for the size of the Church in Palestine is 5,000 total members (Acts 4:4). All subsequent growth is described only in vague terms, and Acts loses complete track of the matter once even those few Palestinian Christians "scattered" and eventually fled (Acts 8:1, 11:19).

At one point (Acts 21:20) we are told a Christian elder boasted that "myriads" of (presumably local) Jews have converted, but unfortunately "myriad" can mean 10,000 or just "thousands" or even "more than I can count!" and so this cannot be treated as a useful or precise estimate. There's no evidence of an actual internal census (otherwise Luke would have more precise numbers to quote), and it would be a Herculean feat even to count thousands, much less tens of thousands, by hand. Consequently, any such announcement had to have been a guess—and a Christian would always guess optimistically. Indeed, outright hyperbole would be typical in such a context—and notably, Luke only puts this claim in someone else's mouth, and thus does not commit to it himself. Similarly (outside the context of Palestine), when Tacitus reports a "huge number" (*multitudo ingens*) of Christians were found in Rome for the Neronian persecution of 64 A.D., this only means the number was uncountable—possibly one or two hundred, as would befit the fact that the population of Rome was one of the largest cities in the world, and one of the primary locations Christians targeted for evangelism.[416]

Scholars agree Christianity was always more successful in cities than in the countryside, and targeted its mission in the first century to urban populations (as exemplified in Acts). Therefore, Christians would be disproportionately represented in cities. If the urban population amounted to as much as 10 million out of a total 60 million (see below), and at least

half of all conversions were urban (in the first century it was probably far more than that), then the percentage of any major city's population that would be Christian in 64 A.D. would be 0.0224 if the percentage of Christians in the entire population at that time was 0.0037. Therefore, the Stark model (discussed below) predicts that over 150 Christians would be in Rome to face Nero's witch-hunt, even though the total number of Christians empire-wide would barely top 2300. By the third or fourth century, the Christian mission would have expanded into the country and small towns. But in the first century, there could easily have been a hundred or more Christians in Rome for Nero to round up. Of course, given what we know of Nero, innocent people falsely accused of being Christians could have added to this number. But either way, "hundreds" out of nearly a million people is still socially microscopic.

Other evidence that's sometimes cited is pretty much useless for arriving at any actual number. The riots under Claudius, driving him to expel the Jews from Rome, cannot be linked to Christianity except by implausible speculation.[417] Suetonius writes *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*, "He expelled the Jews from Rome who were constantly raising a tumult because of the instigator Chrestus." This can't refer to Christians for several reasons, among them: (1) The event is corroborated in no other source, not even Acts, as having anything to do with Christians. (2) Suetonius knows who Christians are and how to refer to them—so if he meant Christians here, he would have said something like "because of the Christians" and not "the Jews" much less "because of Christ the instigator."[418] (3) The text does not say "because of the instigator Christ" but "because of the instigator Chrestus," and Chrestus was a common Greek name (and a common nickname, meaning Handy, Happy, or Goodfellow), and though a misspelling is possible (either by a later scribe or Suetonius himself or his source), that would only be speculating (even against the remaining evidence). (4) Claudius would not expel "the Jews raising a tumult" rather than the Christians, since the Jews had a protected legal status and the Christians did not. For example, according to Acts, neither Gallio nor the Asiarchs of Ephesus expelled the rioters in their towns—they expelled the *Christians*, whose presence provoked the riots—and if it was the Christians whom Claudius expelled, Suetonius would have said so. (5) The phrase "because of Chrestus the instigator" makes no sense as a reference to a dead man or a god. The

word *instigato*r very specifically means a man who performs the act, not the story or claim or idea of a man, nor does it refer to the abstract idea of "instigation" or "cause." Suetonius clearly meant some actual man in Rome was instigating the riots, someone whose name was Chrestus.

The same conclusion follows for three other "facts" sometimes appealed to for establishing Christian numbers: (1) The report by Cassius Dio that Diocletian trumped up bogus charges of atheism against several people in or connected to his family as if they had "fallen into Jewish customs" contains no reference to Christians, even though Dio would certainly know who Christians were (and the earlier account of Suetonius doesn't even mention Judaism *or* Christianity—he says only that the charges were trivial and bogus—and at any rate, neither of them mention numbers).[419] (2) 1 Corinthians 4:14-17 says only "if you *were* to have tens of thousands of tutors in Christ..." That's a subjunctive counterfactual construction, which means they did *not* have tens of thousands of tutors (the word "myriad" again often meant simply "countless" and is thus a hyperbolic expression anyway). (3) The catacombs provide no useful evidence regarding Christian numbers because they began as pagan burial tombs by the end of the 2nd century and were only gradually taken over by Christians in the early 3rd century, and most of the extant catacombs were constructed in the 4th century, and all of them were continually reused for more than three centuries—for all three reasons there is no secure way to identify the number of Christian burials there in the 3rd century.

So nothing can be made of those three facts. Even if the riot recorded by Suetonius had something to do with Christians, Acts reveals that only a handful of Christians, even a single man, was enough to launch riots in Ephesus and Jerusalem (Acts 19 and 21). So similar riots in Rome would not prove anything about numbers. Another useless piece of evidence is the book of Revelation, which says there will be a total of 144,000 virgin Jewish men saved.[420] But there is no reason to believe the unknown author of this text was using any kind of actual count or data—for the book is a record of a mystical vision, and about the future (Revelations 1:1-3), and not a historical fact drawn from any kind of real 'source'. We also don't know when the book was written, or when the author imagined this count would be reached. Moreover, the number is calculated mystically: exactly twelve thousand Jews will come from each of the twelve tribes (Revelations 7:5-8), every single one of them a virgin

(14:4). Clearly we're not looking at any kind of historical report here. Likewise, when Aristides wrote an address to emperor Hadrian (between 117-138 A.D.) in which he called the Christians a new "class" of people, this offers no hint of what kind of numbers Aristides had in mind, since the appellation has nothing to do with number or size, but with categorical distinction: the Christians constituted a new category because their customs and beliefs differed from the traditional categories of the ancient world (such as Barbarian, Greek, or Jew). Aristides makes no clear statement about the number of his brethren—and at any rate, this document falls well outside the first century, and is explicitly apologetic and thus subject to hyperbole. So, again, there is no useful data here.

Some have argued that an anonymous quotation in the 5th-century text of Sulpicius Severus really comes from the lost books of the Histories of Tacitus, and since the passage says the Romans specifically destroyed the Jewish Temple to eradicate the Christians, this implies a substantial Christian presence in Judaea as of 70 A.D.[421] But Severus doesn't say he is quoting Tacitus. It's only by dubious stylistic speculation that the passage is attributed to Tacitus at all, and most scholars believe the passage was redacted by Christians anyway. Indeed, Severus plainly appears to be quoting or paraphrasing a source that credited God with ensuring the Temple's destruction, something Tacitus would never do—while another author (Orosius) who clearly used the same source makes no mention of Titus having Christianity in mind.[422] So this evidence is tainted and unreliable. Even the action proposed—destroying the Temple—could not plausibly have crushed the Christian movement, so the story is inherently unbelievable as a reference to Christians in our sense.

But even if this passage in Severus does go back to Tacitus (or some other author of the same period), it doesn't help us—for we would still not know what drew the ire of the Romans on that occasion. Since (as already noted) Acts claims the Christians could make a substantial nuisance of themselves even when very few, the fact that Romans like Nero found a reason to get rid of them (only six years before Titus razed the Temple) doesn't entail it was their vast numbers that annoyed him. Nero may well have found Christians to be the handiest scapegoats for the burning of Rome because they preached that the world would soon be set on fire (see 2 Peter 3:5-13), or because Paul, all by himself, supposedly had personally secured Nero's attention by causing a riot in Jerusalem (Acts 21 & 28),

which would make Paul (and therefore his "movement") a visible cause of unrest in a troubled province on the brink of a rebellion only a couple years away. Moreover, if Titus believed the Christians were responsible for burning Rome (a crime Tacitus says they'd been convicted of only a few years earlier), that would be reason enough to want to get rid of them, no matter how few of them there were—and given all these fires, riots, and complaints from the Jewish leadership, Titus could easily have thought the movement was larger than it really was. But even if numbers were the issue, the five thousand Christians alleged to exist in Acts would constitute almost an entire legion—certainly enough for a Roman general to worry about—but not enough by 70 A.D. to constitute an impressive popularity for Holding's purpose, even if we were to make all the groundless leaps of speculation needed to get that far.

It has also been claimed that laws would not have been passed against Christians unless there were a lot of them. But even if that were so, how many would there have to be? Any answer would be a purely subjective judgment. Given the fact that Christians routinely engaged in bold and public behavior in several major cities, it would not require many to gain legal attention. Again, Acts shows a mere handful could and did cause several riots, illegal plots, and official charges under Roman law.[423] And a hundred per city in, say, twenty cities would be more than visible enough to warrant a government response—yet is still only a total of 2,000 out of more than 60 million. So, yet again, even with very small numbers they could make a public nuisance of themselves. Indeed, a single man—Paul—sends the entire city of Jerusalem into chaos and gets nearly every Roman official involved all the way up to the Emperor (or so we're told). And Christians were certainly a known presence in Rome by the time of Nero. So even if there *were* laws specifically against being Christian in the first century, that tells us nothing useful about how many Christians there were.

There is also another a Catch-22 here. Holding argues that the status of Christianity as a capital crime entails not only that their numbers were large, but also that the evidence must have been overwhelming or else no one would have joined when the penalties were so high. But this argument requires premises $\mathbf{p_1}$: "Unless evidence of divine support was overwhelming, large numbers of people would not become Christians if it was a capital crime" and $\mathbf{p_2}$: "If being a Christian (in and of itself) was a

capital crime, then Christians must have existed in large numbers." And since $\mathbf{p_2}$ contradicts $\mathbf{p_1}$ unless "evidence of divine support was overwhelming" (and Christianity was a capital crime) Holding's conclusion is thus upheld, if $\mathbf{p_1}$ and $\mathbf{p_2}$ are true. The problem is that any advocate of $\mathbf{p_2}$ must then contend with the fact that it was also a capital crime to rob graves. In fact, from the first two centuries we have far more evidence of laws against graverobbing than for any laws mentioning Christians.[424] Hence $\mathbf{p_2}$ analogously entails that if there were laws against robbing graves, then hundreds of thousands of people must have been graverobbers, which entails $\mathbf{p_3}$: "Hundreds of thousands of people would engage in lethally dangerous and socially despised behavior without overwhelming evidence of divine support." $\mathbf{p_3}$ refutes $\mathbf{p_1}$. Therefore, one must retreat from this fatal assumption and admit to $\mathbf{p_4}$ instead: "Only a tiny fringe minority engaged in graverobbing." And that's probably true—certainly fewer than a tenth of 1% of the population could ever have been graverobbers. But if $\mathbf{p_4}$ is true, then *mutatis mutandis* $\mathbf{p_2}$ is false, and laws could be passed against tiny fringe minorities. Therefore, even if there were laws specifically against Christians, this would not entail that they were more than a tiny fringe minority. You can only escape this conclusion by denying $\mathbf{p_4}$, but denying $\mathbf{p_4}$ entails denying $\mathbf{p_1}$, which refutes Holding's entire thesis. Something has to give, and for Holding, that must be $\mathbf{p_2}$. Therefore, Holding cannot argue from the existence of laws against Christianity to the conclusion that Christians existed in vast numbers.

But the fact is, there is no evidence of any actual law against Christianity anyway until, at best, the mid-2nd or early 3rd century. Prior to that, Christians were rarely prosecuted at all, and even when they were, it was for other generic crimes against Rome, not simply for "being Christian." Paul, we're told, ended up before Gallio on a vague charge of soliciting criminal behavior, but is charged *as a Jew* (Acts 16:20-21). Even Nero had to formally charge Christians with arson to get away with killing them. Tacitus says the charge of arson was probably a bogus accusation that merely served to shift blame for the burning of Rome off Nero and onto a hated minority—which entails Christianity was otherwise not illegal at the time, since false charges were needed to kill them. In case anyone might question the point, it's clear the formal charge was arson, as

Tacitus says, consciously employing formal legal terminology: (1) “In order to get rid of the rumor” that he had burned Rome, “Nero invented culprits,” where *reus* (culprit) is the formal term for a defendant at trial—it’s the standard word for a person charged with a crime or tort—and since the very purpose for “inventing” defendants is to shift the blame for arson, clearly arson had to be the charge; (2) “and at first those were seized who confessed,” where *fateor* is also the formal term for admitting guilt—and the context makes clear they had to be confessing to arson, since that was the offense “invented” for which they became “defendants”; (3) “Then, from evidence they provided, a huge number were convicted,” where *indicio* (“evidence”) is another legal term, and *convinco* (“proved guilty”) is a formal term for winning a conviction at trial; (4) Tacitus then says they were convicted “not as much for the *crime of arson* as because of the hatred of the human race,” thus outright saying that the real, formal “crime” (*crimen*) was “arson” (*incendium*), while the *ulterior* motive that led to “inventing” this charge (and that biased juries against them) was “hatred of the human race” (which can mean either that the human race hated them or that Roman jurors believed the Christians hated the human race). (5) Tacitus does say that as a result of their treatment, “although it was against those who were guilty and deserved the most extreme deterrents, sympathy for them arose, as they were destroyed not so much for the public good, but to serve the savagery of one man,” but here Tacitus drops the formal legal vocabulary, and is thus only declaring a personal judgment against Christians. So Tacitus attests to no law against being Christians.

Even by the early 2nd century, when Pliny the Younger (incidentally a close friend of Tacitus) asked the emperor Trajan what the law was against Christians, Trajan replied, “it is not possible to establish anything in general that has a specific form, so to speak.”[425] In legal jargon that meant there was no actual law, and so Pliny had to use his own judgment. In Roman law, when someone went to trial, the relevant law stated how the judge was to apply a “formula” to the case, which simply made it a matter of satisfying the formula with adequate evidence. Trajan is thus saying there is no such formula. Therefore, there was no law. Trajan even specifically rejects the opportunity to make one. He could have “established” a formula, but instead says it’s impossible to do so for Christians. Hence the only general test Trajan suggests is the same one

Pliny came up with on his own *even before he knew why Christians were criminals*, which is to test whether the accused is a member of an illegal political society: first by asking them to renounce this, then—to make sure they are telling the truth—asking them to do something otherwise trivial that Pliny was told members of their association would never do. This means Pliny understood Christianity as already violating existing laws against illegal associations, and therefore no specific law against Christianity was required. Membership in illegal associations was already a capital crime (particularly in Pliny's province) since any formal association required an approval or a special license issued by the government, which sought assurances that the association was not a covertly treasonous movement against the Roman order.[426]

This explains why Pliny the Younger regarded "obstinacy" (a refusal to renounce a social affiliation) as sufficient evidence of guilt. This also explains why it appears they were tried for the name "Christian," since *Christiani* can mean "members of the party of Christ," in the same way the *Pompeiani* were the supporters of Pompey against Caesar, and Pliny's "test" of their loyalty (renouncing their affiliation and proving their sincerity in this) is considered sufficient proof of innocence or guilt. This corresponds perfectly to the charge against them specifically identified in Acts: "acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar by saying there is another king, Jesus" (17:7). In fact, if even a single man went around all by himself proclaiming he was a Brutian—a supporter of the party of Brutus—Pliny could have executed him on the charge of being a member of the *Brutiani*, not because there was any law specifically against being one, but simply because it was illegal for anyone to support a political party other than Caesar's. Therefore, the Pliny-Trajan correspondence entails there was no specific law against Christians. Indeed, Trajan outright says there is no such law, and then he specifically tells Pliny not to hunt Christians down—so this was not a government that wanted them exterminated (I'll say more about Pliny's letter later in this chapter).

So we are left with no useful evidence of the size of the Christian movement in the first century. Even the only definite number we have—the 5,000 in Acts—comes from an unknown source, and is reported by an author with an obvious bias toward exaggerating the popularity of his movement. We also have no idea how such a number could have been known to Luke. Who counted? Even if we set all that aside, we still don't

get as far as we need to in order to prop up Holding's case. Reasonable estimates for the total population of (the whole of) Palestine in the first century approach 2.5 million. So a Church of even 25,000 members (five times the largest size Luke himself dares to claim) would make up only 1% of the population there. In reality, it's doubtful the Christian Church ever maintained even that size throughout Palestine in the first century, and there's no real evidence it did. Meanwhile, outside Palestine we have no numbers at all, not even from Luke. All we get is a general impression of winning converts here and there—but whenever anything more precise is said, we rarely hear of more than several households per town. Even at our most optimistic, that doesn't look good. We could perhaps imagine a hundred Christians per city by the year 100, which would be a shockingly visible presence, given the small size of ancient towns and the "nosiness" of ancient cultures (as Holding himself makes a point of, as I discussed in Chapter 13). But even by the most optimistic estimates, Christians had then penetrated fewer than 70 towns or cities across the whole Empire—and that only makes for a total of 7,000 people (see below). Again, that's socially microscopic.

We also have to consider that there could have been a lot of apostates—enthusiasts might profess nominal allegiance, receive a free baptism as yet another egg in their basket of supernatural security, and then find out the truth or think things through, or just not care anymore. Christian sources obviously avoid admitting that anyone abandoned the faith, and in fact the only useful observation we have on this phenomenon comes from Pliny the Younger, in his highly rhetorical epistle to Emperor Trajan (as cited earlier). Pliny's account of his own investigation into local Christianity reveals that there were a significant number of Christians who did *not* remain converts—they left of their own accord, even without persecution. Pliny found locals (around 112 A.D.) who had ceased being Christians "two or more years ago, and some of them even twenty years ago," and still more were quick to abandon their beliefs once Pliny threatened them with execution.[427] So we know Christianity had to contend with making up losses. It didn't create some miraculous landslide of unshakable belief.

But even more telling is the fact that Pliny the Younger starts right off by admitting, "I have never been present at an examination of Christians." In fact, he says he knows *nothing* about how they are to be

punished or even charged.[428] This is proof positive that Christians must have been extremely scarce—truly to the point of social invisibility. Pliny had been governor in Asia Minor for over a year already, before even learning there were any Christians in his province, and before that he held the post of consul (the highest possible office in the entire Roman Empire, short of actually being Emperor). He had also been a lawyer in Roman courts for several decades, then served in Rome as Praetor (the ancient equivalent of both Chief of Police and Attorney General), and then served as one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years before he was appointed to govern Bithynia.[429] It's therefore *absolutely incredible* that Pliny had *never* attended a prosecution of Christians and knew *absolutely nothing* about how to prosecute them—he didn't even know why being a Christian was illegal! Therefore, Christians must have been extremely rare indeed throughout the entire Empire, and even at Rome, where Pliny had decades of legal experience. For this means he never once saw a trial, nor had a Christian brought before him, nor ever heard the issue discussed in the Senate, courts, or porticoes, or by any of his peers—not in Asia (until this occasion), nor as top legal advisor to Trajan, nor as the leading law officer in Rome, nor as a lawyer, not even when he held the highest office in the land. That is simply not possible—unless Christians were barely there. That does a lot to corroborate Rodney Stark's conclusion (discussed below).

Some Christian apologists today try to use Pliny the Younger's exaggerated panic as evidence that Christianity was a huge hit. For Pliny claims "temples had for a long time been almost entirely deserted" and "sacred rites had been allowed to lapse" and "scarcely anyone could be found" to buy sacrificial animals (obvious rhetorical exaggerations), "but," Pliny declares with relief, these have all become popular again. Is Pliny saying Christianity had practically eclipsed paganism all around him? That's impossible. For had that been so, how could he know nothing about it? And why would he need informers and anonymous lists to find the Christians? Throughout his letter Pliny appears shocked and surprised to suddenly be finding Christians all over the place—though he doesn't say how many, his astonishment makes no sense if it had become a major local practice. The fact is, Pliny does not say this decline in pagan worship was the consequence of people flocking to Christianity—apol-ogists simply read that inference into the text. Rather, with classic rhetorical

flourish, Pliny is claiming that piety in general had declined into apathy, but people were finding religion again, and that was a good sign because it meant they would stop straying into barbaric superstitions *like* Christianity, and return instead to zealous patriotism. Otherwise, as Pliny's story plainly reveals, you had to look pretty damned hard even to find a local Christian.

Numbers: What the Experts Say

Sociologist Rodney Stark presents a quick survey of important considerations and scholarship regarding the actual rate of growth of Christianity in its first century. He notes that the highest estimate of Christian numbers ever in *bona fide* scholarship is 15 million believers...in the year 300 A.D. Scholarly consensus, however, trends quite strongly toward half that figure, or even less. Given the best estimate of the total population of the Roman Empire at 60 million, this means that even by the most favorable scholarly estimate on record, Christians comprised only 25% of the population *even after nearly three hundred years of evangelism.* And most scholars agree the ratio at that time was probably closer to 10%.[430] Even so, all scholars agree a ratio higher than 25% is completely unsupportable. As Stark rightly points out—and he is a sociologist by profession—a final number like this allows us to predict the average rate of growth over the previous centuries from known historical precedents and scientific models. Stark does the math, and demonstrates that only a rate of growth of around 40% per decade fits the actual data we have as well as known precedents (it roughly matches the rate of growth of the Mormon Church, for example).

Many of Stark's assumptions have been challenged or corrected by actual historians of antiquity, in work that should now be required reading on the subject of the expansion of Christianity.[431] But all the conclusions reached by these scholars support or corroborate my analysis in this chapter (and throughout this book). Bruce Malina has also criticized Stark, arguing that Stark's estimated growth rate is too high:

> 220 bishops (so Henry Chadwick) attended the Council of Nicea called by Constantine in A.D. 325. These bishops functioned in a face-to-face society. Now in a face-to-face society the maximum number of persons with whom one can interact is ca. 4,000 (so the anthro-pologist, Jeremy Boissevain); hence, "scien-tifically" speaking (that is, mathematically), the number of Christians at the time of the Council of Nicea was ca. 880,000, the result of a growth

> rate of ca. 2.5 percent per year [hence Stark] postulates a growth rate that is exaggeratedly high.[432]

However, I'm skeptical of Malina's assumptions, and most scholars argue for a much larger Christian presence by the 4th century (about five times Malina's number), so I will assume the "exaggeratedly high" estimates of Stark are at present the most reasonable. But Stark's model only estimates a rate of growth of roughly 3.42% per year—so if there was one missionary for every hundred members, he would convince less than 4 more people to join each year, which is not remarkable (and if there were more missionaries than that, they were even *less* successful).

Of course, in models like Stark's, growth stops when "market saturation" is achieved (i.e. when all customers who want the product have bought the product), and there is no telling when Christianity actually hit that ceiling. But in order not to bias his results with contrary assumptions, Stark assumes there was no such ceiling (i.e. that everyone could be convinced the product was desirable), which suits Holding, but probably not reality. In reality, Christianity probably never could have gained a majority until it became favored by Rome, and then *required* by Rome, two conditions that each would have expanded the attractiveness of the product and thus raised the ceiling for market saturation. This was especially true when Christians started killing those who didn't buy it (or exiling them and seizing their property, etc.), thus gaining 100% saturation only by outright *eliminating* nonbuyers. By analogy, picture Microsoft actually murdering all Mac users and then boasting "Everyone uses Windows!"

At any rate, Stark surveys the evidence from antiquity that corroborates his estimated growth rate, and he's probably right—for there is no evidence to contradict him, and what little evidence we have supports him. Indeed, as Stark explains, the strongest evidence we have—Roger Bagnall's hard data from Egyptian papyrological documents—quite agrees with Stark's growth curve. Moreover, most experts also agree with Stark's conclusions—I'll mention Hopkins, Fox, and Finn below. So there is no plausible case to be made against Stark's estimate on this point. No evidence counters it. All relevant evidence supports it. One could still "insist" the numbers were higher, and that somehow no real evidence of this survives, but any argument based on a blind conjecture is itself a blind

conjecture, and that won't suit Holding's argument at all (since you can't get from "blind conjecture" to "irrefutable evidence" no matter how hard you try). The fact is, the evidence we have agrees only with Stark—so if we reject Stark, we *still* have no evidence the numbers were higher.

Yet Stark's conclusion entails there could not have been more than 8,000 Christians in the Church by the end of the first century, which fits the above picture of 100 Christians in each of 70 towns—more than enough to visibly 'cause problems' here and there, but nowhere near enough to make Holding's case. However, we must not confuse this number with the number of *converts* in the first century—for almost all the converts made in the 40's would be dead by the year 100, and there is also the inevitable question of apostasy. In both cases Stark is assuming their members are replaced. So if, for example, 75% of those converted throughout the first century were no longer alive by 100 (a reasonable assumption), then by Stark's own estimate the Christians actually won 32,000 converts over its first hundred years. If we add the hypothesis that 1 in 4 converts eventually left the faith voluntarily (out of disillusionment, disagreement, persuasion by outsiders, or simple fear), and that should be a fair assumption even if Christianity was 100% true (roughly 1 in 4 Americans is not a serious Christian today, and Holding would probably argue they have access to sufficient facts to know they are mistaken, while similar ratios exist for deniers of evolution or those who believe Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks of 9/11, in each case despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary), then according to Stark the Christians could claim to have appealed to as many as 40,000 members of the population, a population that over that same period of time would have included at least 120 million adults overall. But that's it. Only 1 out of 3,000 people—just one-thirtieth of one percent—were ever impressed enough to join. That's a trivial scale of success. Indeed, even if we exaggerate beyond all proportion and imagine Stark's math is off by a factor of ten, and Christianity appealed to 400,000 people in the first century, we're still at far less than 1% of the population (comparable to the number of Hindus in the United States today), which we can never claim to be more than a tiny fringe minority.

A more thorough survey of the evidence and scholarship pertaining to Christian numbers was provided in a landmark paper by Keith Hopkins.[433] Hopkins rightly explains that no one can claim anything

definite on this subject, at least for the first two centuries. He's right. Anyone who says anything about Christian numbers is speculating, and not asserting a fact. This is a fatal problem for Holding, whose argument requires factual premises, not speculative ones. The best we can hope for is to arrive at conclusions that do not contradict any relevant evidence, while conforming to that evidence better than any alternative in light of known historical precedents and scientific models—exactly the standards employed by Stark. And, in fact, Hopkins demonstrates the accuracy and plausibility of Stark's conclusions. Thomas Finn also agrees with Hopkins and Stark, and adds further corroborating evidence, while Robin Lane Fox surveys every kind of evidence of Christian numbers anyone could expect to find (especially archaeological), and finds that Christians were practically invisible until the 3rd century, just as Stark's model predicts.[434] We can apparently trust the eyewitness testimony of the Christian scholar Origen that by the dawn of the 3rd century "only a very few" had joined the Christian movement.[435]

In addition to all this, including the direct numerical corroboration of Stark's model from Bagnall's papyrological survey, we have one other statistic that's probably exact and accurate: Bishop Cornelius of Rome tells us the size of the Church at Rome in a letter he wrote around 251 A.D., which Eusebius quotes at length.[436] In passing, Cornelius gives a list of the personnel which is so exact it surely derives from financial records, and altogether the total comes to 60 priests of various grades, an additional staff of 94, "over" 1,500 beggars and widows on the Church dole, and other members "too many to count." The fact that only dependents and staff were counted means, even at this advanced stage in the Church's development, no effort was being made to count the size of its membership—so all earlier counts surely can't be any more than optimistic boasts or guesses. But from this hard data different scholars have variously estimated the Roman Church at between 14,000 and 30,000, or even 50,000 members, in the year 251. No one argues for anything more than that, and even those numbers are probably too high. With only, at most, a hundred men qualified to lead or supervise services each week, and given that the largest meeting spaces available to Christians at the time could accommodate no more than 100 people, the Church at Rome probably could not have claimed more than 11,000 believers—which is pretty close to Stark's prediction of 14,000. There is

absolutely no evidence it was larger than that. Of course, there may have been other, heretical churches in Rome at the time. Though Holding does not regard alternative sects as "true" Christians, we have no evidence how many "false" Christians were in Rome anyway, or if Cornelius is actually discounting them.

Even so, I'll be freakishly optimistic and run with the largest estimate on the scholarly record (that of Edward Gibbon, over 200 years obsolete and pretty much universally rejected by modern experts as much too large). Let's just "assume" this same data suggests a Christian population in Rome of 50,000 in 251 A.D. All scholars agree the population of Rome at this time exceeded 700,000. Christians, therefore, could claim barely 7% of the population of Rome by the mid-3rd century —even by the most flawed and exaggerated estimate on record—which mathematically entails the Church was far smaller in the 2nd century, and even smaller in the 1st. In order for there to be only a 7% penetration of the population of Rome after more than 200 years, this mathematically *requires* an average rate of growth no greater than 50% faster than Stark's —any faster would require implausible phases of zero or even negative growth over several decades in order to fit the facts. Yet increasing Stark's rate of growth by 50% still leaves us with no more than 17,000 Christians throughout the *entire* Roman Empire by 100 A.D., which entails a total tally of "converts" in the first century of roughly 63,000 (using the same assumptions stated earlier). In other words, in its first century, barely 1 in 2000 people knew about and found Christianity attractive *even assuming the most inflated interpretation possible of the best data we have*. So the actual number was certainly much smaller.

Stark begins his progression from an initial base of 1,000. But what if there really were 5,000 in around 40 A.D., as Acts claims? That number is dubious. But Stark's model would still predict no more than 38,000 members by 100 A.D., which means fewer than 200,000 conversions throughout the whole of the 1st century—little more than one-tenth of one percent. Fewer than 1 in 600 converted after several generations of preaching is still fringe, not a popular success. And this isn't plausible anyway, since to match the hard data we have for the 3rd century (from both Bagnall and Cornelius), the rate of growth of the Church would then have to be *lower* than Stark's estimate. So even starting with 5,000 members in 40 A.D., the total number of conversions in the 1st century

was probably less than 100,000, not 200,000. Thus the most credible estimates we have, from what little evidence we have, still get us nowhere beyond a tiny fringe minority, and nowhere near a miraculous success.

Of course, one could dink the rate of growth around in some voodoo seesaw, with huge losses and zero growth over numerous decades, just to get higher numbers in the first century. But there is no evidence the rate fluctuated so wildly, or at all. Holding cannot say "Christianity was miraculously successful in the first century because I said so." It seems the only way to turn is either to accept the Stark model, or a model with even slower net growth than his—or abandon any assertions at all about how many Christians there were in the first century. No one can claim to know, and since Holding's argument requires knowing, his argument fails for lack of data. Any conclusion that actually has *evidential* support, even if we implausibly start with 5,000 Christians in the year 40, must *still* fit projections for the 3rd and 4th century, and when we do that—when we use the evidence we have—we never even approach 1% of the population by 100 A.D. In fact, we can barely pass 0.1%. The evidence simply does not exist to push the numbers higher.

The fact that larger numbers have no support doesn't *entail* the numbers weren't larger, only that we cannot claim to know they were. And this still means Holding can't claim to "know" that the scale of Christianity's success was miraculous. Even in the realm of pure speculation, we find little help for his argument. Earlier we could estimate 400,000 total converts in the 1st century only by multiplying Starks' prediction *by ten*—for no reason whatsoever. This would allow for at most 100,000 members in 100 A.D., but again we're just making this up. We're not arguing from any evidence. But even if by chance we're right, that's still only 1 out of every 300 people converting over the course of sixty years of active recruitment. That means the largest estimate for the whole Empire by the end of the 1st century could never be greater than half of 1%. And again, such a size by 100 A.D. would entail a subsequent rate of growth far less than Stark's, even to meet the wildly inaccurate estimate of Gibbon for the size of the Roman church in mid-3rd century, much less Bagnall's much more reliable data. And that's already stretching the evidence too far. In truth, the numbers must have been less than 0.1% of the ancient population, probably far less, because that's the only estimate that actually fits the data well. So no matter how we try to tweak our

growth model, the actual evidence permits only one conclusion: we cannot prove Christianity was attractive to any more than one out of every thousand people in the first century. That’s simply not miraculous, or even surprising.

With Whom Did Christianity Begin?

Another important point worth a brief survey is the fact that Christianity's limited success in the first century was only among specifically targeted groups who already had their sympathies in the right place. And that meant Jews and Jewish sympathizers, and people for whom the social system was not working—especially the working class. As Paul admits, "not many who are wise in the flesh are called, nor many who are great or noble" (1 Corinthians 1:26). Those weren't Paul's target audiences. And as James writes, "did not God choose them that are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" And "do not the rich oppress you, and drag you into the courts?" (James 2:5-6). The social identity of first-century Christians is pretty clear in these remarks. I've discussed different aspects of this fact in several previous chapters already. So I will only round out the point here.

First, to say that Christianity appealed to the disgruntled lower classes, and not the elite, must not to be mistaken for claiming that Christianity was only successful among the *poor*, or that *no* rich people were attracted to it. A significant number of the middle class would be among the same groups sympathetic to the Christian message, including educated men, and men with middle-management positions in the government, who could easily become disillusioned with a system that wasn't working for them. As long as they were in a position to feel powerless within an unjust social system, despising and unable to enter or overcome the power and influence of those higher up the ladder, they would sympathize with the idea of an unjustly crucified hero, among many other elements of the Christian message. And their sympathy would be even greater if they already shared the point of view of those Jews who accepted an ideology of martyrdom and expected a suffering savior.

Modern scholars are agreed on the lower-class origins of the Christian movement. As John Polhill argues, the author of Luke, himself clearly well-educated, "had a concern for people who are oppressed and downtrodden," like "Samaritans and eunuchs," and "one of Luke's main concerns in Acts was to portray a church without human barriers, a

community where the gospel is unhindered and truly inclusive."[437] Richard Rohrbaugh adds, "John is almost certainly a Galilean gospel" written for "a group which exists within a dominant society but as a conscious alternative to it ... an alienated group which had been pushed (or withdrawn) to the social margins where it stood as a protest to the values of the larger society" (or the corruption of those values, as I've explained in previous chapters), while Matthew targeted educated Jews and "the retainer class" among Greeks, and Mark targeted peasants and other members of the "agrarian class," among both Jews and pagans.[438] Christianity was most successful in finding sympathizers in these very audiences—those on the bottom, and those stuck in the middle, who were growing weary of the failure and corruption of the entire social system.

Christianity made little headway into the scholarly, administrative, or economic elite, until it had positions of power and authority to offer them, within a wealth-generating Church hierarchy (by the mid-to-late 2nd century), amidst an otherwise collapsing social system (in the mid-3rd century), which I'll discuss below. Rather, on the upper ends of the ladder Christianity was mainly attractive to the artisan class, and appealed to values held by them, and not shared by the elite. This is evident in Acts, as Ben Witherington observes:

> The favorable attitude toward artisans in Luke-Acts was not a typical attitude of many in the upper strata of society, but it was typ-ical of how artisans and retainers viewed themselves, and how Jews in general viewed work so long as it was not ritually defiling.

In fact, Witherington concludes that Luke himself "is not among the elite of society," since he "addresses Theophilus in a mode associated with a person who is willingly or unwillingly in a subordinate position to a person of rank in Roman society."[439] Theophilus was thus (either actually or fictively) Luke's social superior, and was probably a member of the equestrian class (in our terms, the upper middle class), which means Luke must have been of even lower status. The word Luke uses to address Theophilus is *kratistos* (Greek for both *egregius* or *clarissimus* in Latin), which could denote an equestrian or a senator, but more likely the former, as usually a senator's formal Roman name would take priority in a proper address (whereas here he is identified solely by his Greek name). Senators

were usually comparable to a landed aristocracy, whereas equestrians were often working professionals (or their sons). Which would explain the widely favorable treatment of the values of artisans throughout Luke and Acts: Luke is playing to his audience (I'll discuss the difference in values between the aristocratic and professional classes in antiquity in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*).

Thus, when we hear about "respectable" men and women converting (e.g. Acts 17:12), this implies no actual formal status, but refers to people of means who sought and held a good reputation in their community. Of course, Acts has obvious apologetic reasons to inflate Christianity's success among "respectable" people. Even so, the artisan class had its share of "respectable people" and it's clear that Christianity found friends in that community (as I already discussed in Chapter 2). Likewise, while we hear of Pharisee converts (not just Paul but others in Acts), it should be obvious that these were not the ones writing Talmudic precedent or running Rabbinical schools, but those who were (like Paul) marginalized within the Pharisee community, given relatively less authority and respect by more prestigious members of the sect, and who were therefore quite ready to sympathize with criticism of the ungodly snobbery of their peers (as noted, for example, in Chapter 12).

At the same time, Christianity first targeted mainly Jews and Jewish sympathizers, and worked its way through family acquaintances. "Early Christianity," David DeSilva argues (Holding's very own source), "was basically a 'household' movement first in that it sought after the conversion of heads of households, whose dependents would follow them into the new faith" (p. 226). In fact, DeSilva goes on to document this fact from the New Testament itself in substantial detail. And, of course, I have already discussed the effective tactic of targeting women in Chapter 11 and heads of household in Chapter 10. Any religion that secures the source of children, especially children of the masses (who far outnumber those of the elite), is going to have a tremendous social advantage.

It's also no accident that Christianity was most successful in the first century among prepared audiences: namely Jews and Jewish converts and sympathizers, who already had a good grounding in scripture, were already awed by the divine authority of that scripture, and already attracted to the relevant Jewish ideals (such as the heroism of martyrs and the value of moral austerity). It's notable, for example, that Paul converts only "some"

Jews, but "a great multitude" of Judaized *pagans*, in Acts 17:1-4. The implication is that those who *already* showed a propensity to radically relocate themselves in the social environment were the ones most ready to buy the Christian message. Likewise, after their disheartening failure to gain significant headway in Palestine, most Christian success in Acts is gained in the Diaspora—and not just geographically, but ideologically: Diaspora Jews had the most cosmopolitan outlook, and had either been pagans or understood pagan ideals quite well. It should not surprise us that they were the most receptive to the Christian mission, which highly syncretized the best of Jewish and pagan ideals into a potent new faith, which sold itself as the perfect culmination of the oldest of all faiths. It's also worth noting that the evidence for god-fearers (pagan converts or sympathizers to Judaism) is quite significant in the first two centuries, *unlike* the evidence for Christians, which means this class already considerably outnumbered Christians for at least a hundred years, so small was Christian success in that time.[440]

Therefore, all these factors must be taken into account in any explanation of Christianity's limited success in its first hundred years. The correct explanation must explain not just where Christianity succeeded, but also where it *failed*. Holding's theory fails this test. According to his theory, those most able and willing to check the facts should have been the most impressed by Christian claims. Instead, they are the *least* impressed. Elite scholars and Palestinian Jews just weren't profitable markets for the early Christians. In contrast, my theory, which is also the theory advanced by many of Holding's own favorite sources (Malina, Neyrey, Rohrbaugh, DeSilva) and nearly every other expert I know (Stark, Fox, Sanders), and which *nullifies* Holding's theory, proposes that Christianity *deliberately* gave short shrift to elite values, perceptions, or expectations in order to appeal to the significantly different values, perceptions, and expectations of the lower classes, and of those in the upper classes who were located outside the echelons of real power or control—such as middlemen, women, and the slaves of prominent men.[441] This theory predicts that Christianity would get a very cold, even hostile response from the elite, but find receptive audiences among prepared groups outside the elite. Only my theory fits the actual facts of history.

Holding tries to deny this by fallaciously shifting the burden onto me when he protests my factually true statement that *there is no evidence*

that any elite scholars converted to Christianity in the first century. Holding continues to insist he has the right to pretend some did, only we have no evidence of it. But he has no such right. By their very nature, elite scholars typically leave evidence of their existence, especially when their team ultimately wins control of the culture and has every reason to preserve its heritage (as the Christians did in the 4th century). So absence of evidence *is* evidence of absence in this case, meeting the criteria of a valid argument from silence.[442] We can be sure there were none, because had their been, we'd have evidence of it now. Had it been the case that hundreds of such elites were being converted in the first century, we would have a much larger body of letters and texts from that century (as Keith Hopkins explains in his work cited earlier), even allowing a reconstruction of the leading families involved and their connections to each other. Instead, we have very little writing from first century Christians, and very little information regarding who wrote these things or what their connections were to other elite converts. This state of evidence supports the conclusion that only a very small penetration of the educated class was achieved in that century.

I've discussed the scant few first-century conversions among the elite claimed in the earliest sources in Chapters 1 and 7 (most if not all are dubious, but even if genuine, clearly none wrote anything and thus were not among the literary elite). Rodney Stark has tried to argue (against the mainstream view) that Christianity actually had *more* success above than below, but Fox and Hopkins both correct Stark on this point.[443] He did not adequately take into account the fact that all written texts, by the very nature of being written, come from Christians of higher social class than most converts, requiring both the skills and the peculiar motivation to put pen to paper, which were distinctions of the educated class (which ranged much wider than the narrower category of the scholarly elite). As a result, Christian texts *over-represent* the interests of families with the unusual means and connections to support an education for their children. More careful reading is required to identify the overall status and origins of the whole body of Christian converts, and actual historians (like Polhill and Rohrbaugh) have done this work, arriving at the consensus position that Christianity actually got started more from the bottom up than the top down.

But even if all that weren't so, Holding still can't bootstrap his case with groundless assertions. The fact remains: the evidence does not support the claim that any elite scholars converted in the 1st century. That's what I said. And that remains true. If Holding wants to rest his case on a groundless assertion that such converts existed, then his conclusion becomes a groundless assertion, too, and as I've said already: I'm quite content with that. That his conclusions are groundless is exactly what my critique aims to prove. So I welcome all the assistance Holding wants to give me in proving my case against him. But insofar as the evidence is clearly against there having been any early converts among the scholarly elite, and next to none among the well-established elite, we are faced with having to explain this. Holding's theory cannot, while mine does.

The Rise of World Christianity

In the 3rd century the Roman Empire withered under fifty years of constant and devastating civil war and massive economic depression from which the Empire never really recovered.[444] By the end of that century, every social institution was in ruins. The economy almost entirely collapsed, as the value of gold, silver, and coin plummeted so low that draconian measures had to be taken by the government even to keep basic services functioning. Since this meant countless endowments for schools went bankrupt, fewer were being educated. Artisans were increasingly among civilian casualties, or forced by bankruptcy into unskilled trades, or drafted into armies and killed off, thus breaking traditions of art and craft. Fascism hardened at the political level, and the aristocracy was so ravaged by war, assassination, and lethargy that the military pretty much took over—not merely deciding who would rule (as it often had done before), but actually supplying new emperors and leaders from then on out. In the past, a glorious senatorial career was the path to honors and power—now, a career in the government or military was increasingly the only way to obtain either. What's more, the Empire fractured into two. Though it was occasionally reunited, the division only became worse over time, until it was complete. Then the Western Empire was destroyed, while the Eastern Empire slowly deflated into oblivion—meeting a slow death of a thousand years of shrinking talent and territory.

This collapse of a once-trusted social system, and the ensuing atmosphere of turmoil, ruin, and uncertainty, became perfect soil for the success of the Christian Church. Christianity could flourish during all this because it was a well-organized, empire-wide social-services institution that was *not* connected to or dependent on the system undergoing collapse. That was a powerful advantage. Had any other religion thought of that instead, and achieved this entirely natural advantage for itself, it might have replaced Christianity as the religious victor of the Western World. For because of this, Christianity could offer not only a current refuge and a future rescue from a world gone wild, but also a convenient explanation for *why* it was going to ruin (as explained in Chapter 6). The Christians had set out from

the beginning to create a “Kingdom of God” within the “Kingdom of Rome,” a new community wherein society worked the way the poor and disgruntled wanted it to: realizing communism in place of capitalism, and erasing the privileges of class (increasing exploitations of the system by the Church hierarchy notwithstanding). Once the Roman social system was going to ruin, even more members of society became poor, disgruntled, disenfranchised, or disillusioned than ever before—hence the very groups Christianity most appealed to were now the fastest growing. The Christian Church had an established quasi-utopian system in place for them to flock to. For it had always sought to give these groups exactly what they most wanted, and by the 3rd century it was in a better position to provide it than any other institution.

The crisis of the 3rd century also threw the game to Christianity because Christians so fervently recruited women and the working classes. This was far more brilliant a move than the disastrous decision of Mithraists, for example, to target only men and to focus primarily on the army. They simply lost their investment when the army ended up utterly devastated over the course of the 3rd century. While Christians were winning over twice as many candidates, by appealing to two genders, and also earning a huge return on children born and raised into the faith by female converts, Mithraists were seeing none of that action, while watching their numbers get hacked away by fifty years of ceaseless civil war. Anyone can now see who was going to win in that contest. But it was even worse for Mithraism: First, constant military disaster and hardship, without a consistent victory in sight, for two whole generations, was widely understood in antiquity to signal the failure of your religion. Therefore, by historical fate alone, Mithraism was doomed to be abandoned, because it was predominately supported by the very soldiers who were losing and thus seeing no benefit from their piety. Conversely, massive military losses had to be made up with fresh recruits—but who had been recruiting from the remaining pool of manpower? And who was now having more children for recruiters to draft? The Christians—thanks to their special attention to winning over women and working class men. Therefore, by the end of the 3rd century, thanks to the ordinary exigencies of historical fate, Mithraism became increasingly unpopular, while the armies, once bastions of Mithraism, were compelled to become increasingly Christian—at

precisely the time when most new leaders of the Empire were coming from the military.

This doesn't mean I imagine Mithraism could have been the Christianity of the future. Mithraism never incorporated the elements of evangelism that constantly drove Christianity—ultimately even to the point of compelling belief on pain of death, torture, or intimidation. I see nothing in Mithraism that would ever have spawned such behavior, and consequently, had there been no Christianity, I suspect there would have simply remained the same religiously diverse society that so well served Rome for hundreds of years before that disastrous 3rd century. I focus on Mithraism only to provide an example of how Christianity got lucky breaks over its competitors that played right into its hand. Of course, one could always claim God ruined society in order to secure Christianity's success, much as Christian apologists have claimed God arranged the murder of millions of Jews simply to bring about the formation of Israel, but I can only hope you have a more rational view of God. For surely an omnipotent being could have brought about both ends without all the pointless misery—and a compassionate God by definition would have. At any rate, historians have no trouble finding sufficient causes of these events in natural historical facts. So appeals to God are gratuitous.

The 3rd century was decisive in securing the grandiose success of later Christianity, and was indeed a lucky draw from the deck—since nothing about Christianity itself, or caused by it, had anything to do with bringing that crisis about. This was a crisis of the pagan world's own doing (though having little to do with religion, and much to do with the failure to develop a stable constitutional government). So we can't blame Christianity for the fall of the Roman Empire. The triumph of Christianity was a *symptom* of that fall, not its cause. But there was also a sense in which Christianity exploited this niche by design. Though the early Christians had no way of knowing how everything would fall apart in two hundred years, they certainly saw the cracks forming, and specifically sought to repair them, with their moral vision of social reform. And for that very reason, in its first few centuries Christianity did look like it was working, in a way the wider social system was not—especially since the major social institutions of the time were *increasingly* failing, getting worse and worse, in exactly those same centuries (thanks to increasing, unchecked corruption—of the very same sort that would lead to the collapse of the 3rd century), thus

making Christianity look remarkably good, even supernaturally prescient, by comparison. Their timing couldn't have been better. Luck strikes again. Had the Empire maintained the Pax Romana of the glory years, with the wealth and progress of the 1st and early 2nd century, and had the Senate established a stable constitutional government by the 3rd century (as the movie *Gladiator* pretended was the real plan of Marcus Aurelius) instead of fifty years of civil war, I suspect Christianity would have been doomed—not to oblivion, but at least to obscurity, a fate much like American Hinduism. Today, Christians would perhaps be a small fringe cult, as they had been before, competing for customers with scores of other cults and sects (assuming the West remained as religious as it actually has). I suspect this because were the Roman armies victorious and prosperous instead of decimated and ruined, Mithraism would have been vindicated, and would not have lost its hold on the army (though, as I've said, I doubt it would have become a universal religion, even within the ranks). At the same time, Christianity would not have had as much to offer anymore, as peace and prosperity would gradually claim more and more potential converts by giving them what they wanted: material happiness and security at the hands of a successful—and therefore "obviously" divinely sanctioned—pagan government (as discussed in Chapter 6).

It wouldn't be that simple, of course—any number of unexpected things could happen in the absence of what actually did—and I'm assuming such a period of peace and prosperity in Rome would have opened the door to realizing the trends, advocated among the philosophical elite, toward greater justice, equality, and reason, instead of Roman society becoming more unequal, unjust, superstitious, and socially polarized as in fact it did. I might be wrong about that. But I doubt I'm wrong about the clear advantages the chaos of the 3rd century gave to Christianity against its competitors—particularly when we factor in the very convenient timing of the fact that its natural and inevitable rate of growth accelerated Christianity's numbers to significant levels exactly during that very century (as Stark, Hopkins, and Finn explain), and when we take into account the fact that everyone is eager to try something new when everything old has failed. Had everything old *not* failed, "new ideas" like Christianity would have ceased to gain much purchase. And had the natural progression of steady Christian growth not coincided so well with the collapse of pagan society, it's probable that the forces opposed to

Christianity would have succeeded, if not in destroying it, certainly in changing it into something very different (as had happened to many other imported cults). Instead, with Christianity's victory over society, elite ideals were vanquished. And a thousand years of ruin ensued. But that's another story.

Conclusion

Even by our best estimates, Christians only managed to persuade a thousand people to join every few years or so, despite evangelizing nearly a hundred cities and beyond, throughout a massive empire of many tens of millions of people. By the end of the first century the Church is unlikely to have exceeded even ten thousand active members across the whole Empire. That's simply not a miraculous success.

However, Holding says he wrote his original essay (and now a book) to respond to the claim that Christianity originated, and originally flourished, among "suckers," people so gullible they'd believe anything, no matter how absurd. As usual for Holding, that's an exaggeration of what his critics really say. Those who converted to Christianity did indeed have a backward method of inquiry, fervently clung to anti-empirical values, were substantially ignorant of most of what they really needed to know in order to make a sound judgment, and held very different assumptions about God, man, and the universe than we do. But this doesn't mean they would have believed *anything*. It only means that the things they'd be inclined to believe—and in fact did believe (even apart from Christianity)—were not limited to the truth, but in fact encompassed a great deal of nonsense. After all, these were people who *really* thought God lived in outer space, that the whole universe revolved around his created Earth, that demons possessed their neighbors and caused madness and disease, that supernatural beings inhabiting the air spoke and appeared to people or worked spells on them, and that bad people were all the puppets of Satan and his legion of devils. Clearly they had a lot of false beliefs. Claiming their belief that "Jesus rose from the grave" was false, too, is hardly a stretch.

And that's the real issue here: Holding is upset by early Christians being called "suckers" and early Christian ideology being called "absurd," but the fact is these are relative terms. From *their* point of view they were not suckers, but fortunate—most of them got what they wanted, or very near to it: a brief glimpse of happiness and comfort within a surrogate family that really met their needs, emotionally and materially, with a hope of

even more in a utopian future. And they took a shot at what they honestly thought would right the wrongs of their dysfunctional society. They were wrong. But then, being passionately wrong about a grand plan to fix society puts them in good historical company. Likewise, converts obviously didn't think a Christian's claims were absurd. That's why they converted. These ideas were only "absurd" to those committed to worldviews very different from the masses—such as the ancient naturalists and their sympathizers. It just so happens that those naturalists turned out to be on the right track, and the mystics on the wrong one (as I'll show in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*). Hence a modern scientific thinker has far more right to call early Christian beliefs "absurd" than even the ancient critics did. But our charge of absurdity comes from knowledge—knowledge the ancients didn't have. Let's face it. Demonic possession, exorcized by laying on hands and uttering words of power, is indeed absurd. Yet it was a fundamental component of the Christian religion at the time. So we can't honestly doubt that ancient Christianity was at least partly absurd. And if partly, why not entirely?

The word "sucker," on the other hand, implies being duped by a con man, but there's no need to suppose early Christians were being "conned." Maybe some were. But I'll bet those who started the movement really believed their dreams, visions, and interpretations of scripture. And even at worst, I'll bet they fabricated these things for a noble moral purpose, not for material gain or some scheme to "steal souls" or any such nonsense. Later Christians might be a different story. But I'm sure the first Christians were sincere. They really thought they had a Good Idea for Saving the World. And that feeling is a powerful drug. It has fueled every zealot, every fanatic, every passionate revolutionary in history. Moreover, to say someone would believe "anything no matter how absurd," implies they would believe it *even knowing it was absurd*. But that isn't the case here. Early Christian beliefs were not seen as absurd by converts, only by critics—because converts and critics embraced very different worldviews right from the start. No Christian would have believed anything they felt was absurd—and they didn't. For example, to a Christian it was absurd even to think that a courageous and morally upright man who could heal the sick and expel demons was *not* an emissary of God's will. Of course, this means their definition of absurdity was very different from ours.

What we've seen throughout all these chapters is that Christianity was indeed repulsive, absurd, or just plain false from the point of view of most people of the time, pretty much as Holding says. But Christianity never attracted most people—by honest argument and evidence, that is, since the use of force and political and social pressure was ultimately necessary to win that majority, centuries after the mission began. It's quite true that had Christianity made itself more attractive to more people, it would have been more successful than it was, more quickly, and with far less effort. But the end result was the same: over time Christianity changed to become more attractive to more people, by developing more appealing doctrines and incorporating popular festivals and superstitions. That was the only way it really could succeed—and that was the only way it actually did. Just imagine how horrified Paul would have been at the Cult of Saints, for example, which was really just polytheism in disguise, complete with revering statues and artifacts and praying to specific 'deities' who had power over specific aspects of life. With that system in place, the average pagan could hardly tell the difference between his beliefs and a Christian's. And even today, only by making itself "more popular" has any branch of Christianity managed to succeed in the modern free world.[445]

But in the beginning, Christianity *was* a radical idea to most, but for that very reason it was not very successful by any objective standard—except within a very small cross-section of the population, primarily those disgruntled with or oppressed by the values and institutions of the dominant society. And *from the point of view of those few* Christianity was an attractive idea whose time had come. This minority did not need "irrefutable" evidence that Jesus rose from the grave, because they had "irrefutable" evidence that the Christian message had the backing of God: in the moral superiority of believers, and their ability to 'work miracles', interpret scripture with surprising insight, and speak of God's will with charismatic inspiration. This is hardly "irrefutable" evidence for us—because we know a lot more than they did about human nature and the workings of the body, mind, and universe. We know that none of their "evidences" entails the conclusion, or even so much as strongly implies it. But that's us. We have the advantage of hindsight, and of scientific knowledge reason. They didn't. That doesn't make them "suckers." It just

makes them wrong. Nor does it mean their beliefs were “absurd” to them. It just means they were false.

1 The tactics, behavior, and (in my opinion) incompetence of J.P. Holding as a scholar are documented on a website devoted entirely to collecting complaints and analyses from people who have dealt with him before: “Tektonics Exposed! A Collection of Essays and Debates Highlighting the Depraved Apologetics of J.P. Holding, a.k.a. Robert Turkel” (the-anointed-one.com, esp. /exposed.html).

2 J.P. Holding, “The Impossible Faith: Or, How Not to Start an Ancient Religion” (Tekton Apologetics Ministries: n.d.): www.tektonics.org/lp/nowayjose.html.

3 All my quotations of J.P. Holding are from his online articles (cited in Notes 2 and 6) as they appeared in 2004, and not from his book (hence no page numbers will be given).

4 My generous benefactor was the pseudonymous Johnny Skeptic (johnnyskeptic.com), who wanted a professional scholar to give J.P. Holding’s argument a thorough review and critique, and was willing to fund exactly that. Briefer critiques had been written by Bob Price (“James Patrick Holding’s *The Impossible Faith*,” www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/rev_holding.htm) and Brian Holtz (“The Not-So-Impossible Faith,” The Secular Web: 2002, www.infidels.org/library/modern/brian_holtz/impossible_faith.html).

5 Richard Carrier, “Was Christianity Too Improbable to be False?” (The Secular Web: 2004, 2006, rights to the electronic version owned in part by the Secular Web): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/improbable.

6 J.P. Holding, “Broken Vector Sinks Again: Or, TIF Vindicated” (Tekton Apologetics Ministries: 2004): www.tektonics.org/lp/nowayjose_CC2.html.

7 See Robert Shmerling, “The Real Dangers of Lightning” (Aetna InteliHealth.com: 2001). I’ve discussed these problems of relative probability before, in Richard Carrier, “Probability of Survival vs. Miracle: Assessing the Odds,” in Part 2 of my somewhat outdated essay collection “Why I Don’t Buy the Resurrection Story” (The Secular Web: 5th ed., 2004): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/2.html.

8 I will discuss Bayes’ Theorem and its application to historical method in considerable detail in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*, and more briefly in a chapter in the forthcoming anthology *Sources of the Jesus Tradition*. But the best example I’ve seen of a practical discussion of Bayes’ Theorem in contexts related to historical analysis is Douglas Hunter, *Political [and] Military Applications of Bayesian Analysis: Methodological Issues* (1984). For a more recent but highly technical discussion see Giulio Agostini, *Bayesian Reasoning in Data Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (2003).

9 Samuel Noah Kramer, “The First Tale of Resurrection,” *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Man's Recorded History*, 3rd ed. (1981): pp. 154-67. For more on Inanna, Tammuz, and (as we shall see) Adonis, and Attis, see: G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis* (1997); Diane Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (1983); Eugene Lane, *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M. J. Vermaseren* (1996) and M. J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult* (1977); Betty De Shong Meador, *Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna* (2001).

10 *Apostolic Constitutions* 5.12.

11 Origen, *Selecta in Ezechielem*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* 13:800.

12 See my critical comments in Richard Carrier, “Kersey Graves and *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors*” (The Secular Web: 2003): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/graves.html. For a good comparative study see Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (2000).

13 For the many alternative explanations of this discrepancy in the predicted timing of Jesus’ death and resurrection see Evan Fales, “Taming the Tehom: The Sign of Jonah in Matthew,” *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 307-48.

14 As I argue in Richard Carrier, “The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb,” in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 158-61.

15 Joshua 8:29 and 10:26-27; 1 Samuel 31:10; 2 Samuel 4:12; Ezekiel 16:39-40; Esther 9:13-14; Lamentations 5:12; and of course: Genesis 40:19-22.

16 Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Code of Hammurabi § 21, 153, 227.

17 On ancient prostitutes, see: Catharine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. Hallett and M. Skinner (1997) and Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (1995). On ancient slavery: Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (1981) and Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (1987). On gladiators: Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (1995) and Michael Grant, *Gladiators* (1967).

18 On ancient Attis-Cybele cult, see references in note 1 above and: Robert Turcan, “The Great Mother and Her Eunuchs,” *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (1996): pp. 28-74; Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (1998): pp. 164-66.

19 This quote comes from Seneca’s lost work *On Superstition*, written before 65 A.D., but quoted by Augustine in *City of God* 6.10. Augustine makes implausible excuses for the fact that Seneca never mentions Christianity, even though Seneca attacks every conceivable cult in this work, including Judaism (6.11). Seneca might not have mentioned it because he had never heard of it—meaning the book had to have been written before the persecution of 64 A.D., and may well have been written as early as the year 40 (the beginning of Seneca’s known literary career).

20 *Theodosian Code* 16.10.13.

21 On the government’s Christianization of the Empire, see: Bill Leadbetter, “From Constantine to Theodosius (and Beyond),” *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Esler (2000): vol. 1, pp. 258-92 (Theodosius: 285-87).

22 See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (1997) and David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (1998). For political and administrative context, see Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire: AD 284-430* (1993) and A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (1964).

23 This is gleefully detailed by Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry, Bishop of Gaza*. See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100-400* (1984): pp. 86-89; and Robert Grant, *Early Christianity and Society: Seven Studies* (1977): pp. 9-11.

24 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.116-19; Mark 11:29-32; etc.

25 Matthew 14:1-2; Mark 6:12-16, 8:27-28; Luke 9:18-19.

26 For example, see 1 and 2 Maccabees (and also Daniel 11:33-35 & 12:3). Disgust at the murder of righteous men by those in power is certainly a complaint voiced by early Christians, quoting the rebuke of Elijah: e.g. Luke 11:47, Acts 7:52; 1 Thessalonians 2:15, Romans 11:3, drawing on 1 Kings 19:10. See Alan Segal's discussion of the social context of early Jewish martyrology in his *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004): pp. 285-321. For more on the socio-cultural causes of this reverence for martyrs, see Chapter 8.

27 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.255-56.

28 See: Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Sourcebook* (1998): § 2.10b: pp. 57-58; and E. Dinkler, *Signum Crucis* (1967). Archaeologically, the wall the graffito was cut into did not exist in the 1st century or the early 2nd, and the carving is most likely associated with activity there in the early 3rd century.

29 I will discuss the evidence for this in Chapter 18, but the case is adequately presented in David Horrell, "Early Jewish Christianity" and Thomas Finn, "Mission and Expansion," both in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Esler (2000): vol. 1, pp. 136-67 & 295-315 (respectively).

30 On Jewish sympathizers in general, see Margaret Williams, "VII.2. Pagans Sympathetic to Judaism" and "VII.3. Pagan Converts to Judaism" in *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (1998): pp. 163-79.

31 On the later forgery of writings by this Dionysius see "Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite" in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997): p. 485. On the office he held see "Areopagus" and "zeugitai" in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): pp. 151-52 & 1636 (respectively).

32 As catalogued, for example, in "Major Events in Japanese History" (www2.kanawa.com/japan/history.html).

33 See Richard Carrier, "Osiris and Pagan Resurrection Myths: Assessing the Till-McFall Exchange" (2002): [at www.frontline-apologetics.com/Carrier_on_Osiris_.html] and John Griffiths, *The Origins of Osiris and His Cult*, 2nd ed. (1980) and *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (1970). On his death and resurrection: Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 12.355d-19.358e (written near the end of the 1st century); Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.27-30 (early 2nd century); Seneca, *On Superstition*, via Augustine, *City of God* 6.10 (see earlier note).

34 Sealed tomb or casket: Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 13.356b-d (called a "burial" at 42.368a); compare Matthew 27:66. Number of conspirators: Plutarch, id.; the Sanhedrin who condemned Christ consisted of seventy-one men (per Mishnah Law, *Sanhedrin* 1.5 & 1.6) and Judas makes seventy-two. Third day: Plutarch, id. & 39.366e-f; compare 1 Corinthians 15:4, and in every story Jesus always dies on a Friday and rises on a Sunday (which is the third day, since in antiquity days were counted inclusively). Full moon: Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 42.367e-f; all stories have Jesus dying on or within a day of the Passover, which always occurs during a full moon. See my discussion of these details in my online FAQ for *The Empty Tomb* (www.richardcarrier.info/SpiritualFAQ.html#
osiris-parallel).

35 Plutarch, *Romulus* 27-28 (late 1st century) and the pre-Christian author Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 1.16.2-7 (written c. 15 B.C.); also Cicero, *Laws* 1.3, *Republic* 2.10 (c. 40 B.C.); Ovid, *Fasti* 2.491-512 (c. 10 A.D.); Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.63.3 (c. 10 B.C.); Tertullian, *Apology* 21 (c. 200 A.D.).

36 Orpheus: Apollodorus, *Library* 1.3.2. Bacchus: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 69-70.

37 Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:49-54, 2 Corinthians 5:2-4; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.32; *Gospel of Phillip* 57.(23); *Ascension of Isaiah* 9.9-18. See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (1995): p. 109 and Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 119, 132-33, 134, 140-41.

38 Isaiah 49:7; that this was a messianic prophecy is clear from the context (Isaiah 49:1-13). See, also, Psalms 89:38-45 (which is specifically about "the Christ" being shamed and maltreated).

39 Isaiah 53:9 (which also says the messiah will be "with a rich man in his death," a plausible basis for having a rich man bury him in Mark's narrative) and 53:12; Mark 15:28.

40 Isaiah 50:4-9, 52:7-53:12.

41 Psalms 22:1, 6-7. That this Psalm forms a model for Mark's crucifixion narrative is clear to anyone who compares the two, e.g. compare Psalms 22:8-18 with elements in Mark 15.

42 *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:12-22 & 5:1-8, 5:15-23.

43 See relevant discussion in Richard Carrier, "The Burial of Jesus in Light of Jewish Law," *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 375-79.

44 Daniel 9:26.

45 Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian* 4.

46 Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.312-16.

47 Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13.

48 Julius Africanus, *Chronology* § 18.2 (via George Syncellus).

49 *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:12-3:3.

50 See H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (1989) and D.S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (1994); as well as Robin Lane Fox, "Language of the Gods," *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 168-261.

51 See Todd Klutz, "Paul and the Development of Gentile Christianity" and Jeffrey Siker, "Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries," in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 168-97 (esp. p. 193) and 231-57 (esp. pp. 232-35), respectively.

On Paul's criticisms of his fellow Jews (which paralleled those of other Jewish radicals, such as the community at Qumran), see Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (1997) and Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (1992)

On the separation of Christianity from Judaism and its corresponding development of anti-Semitism, see: John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (1985); Peter Schafer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (1997); William Farmer, *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels* (1999); Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (2003).

52 For example, see Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:15 (w. 3:16-4:6); Ephesians 2:11-19, 4:1-6; and Romans 2:10-11 (indeed, the entirety of Romans chs. 12 and 13).

53 On all these facts, the evidence is thoroughly documented by Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (1996), and Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* and *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Sourcebook* (1998).

54 Michael Rodkinson, "The Generations of the Tanaim: First Generation" in *The Babylonian Talmud* (1918): www.sacred-texts.com/jud/t10/ht202.htm; and "Hillel and Shammai" in the *Jewish Virtual Library* (2004): www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/
jsource/biography/hillel.html.

55 b.Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.

56 Mishnah, *Abot* 2.2a-b.

57 Rabbinical proverb: b.Gemara 29a. Pagan proverb: Xenophon, *Economics* 20.15.

58 Mishnah, *Abot* 1.10b.

59 Mishnah, *Qiddushin* 4.14l.

60 Philo (a Jewish philosopher contemporary with Paul), via Eusebius, *Preparation of Gospel* 8.11.5-12. See also: s.v. "Essenes," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971): vol. 6, pp. 899-902; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997): p. 562; *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2000): vol. 1, pp. 262-69. Sources describe as many as six different factions of Essenes, each with slightly different beliefs.

In addition, the ancient Therapeutae were probably a faction of the Essenes as well. See: s.v. "Therapeutae," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971): vol. 15, pp. 1111-12; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997): p. 1608; *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, (2000): vol. 2, pp. 943-46. Eusebius found the Therapeutae so similar to Christians that he mistook them as an early Christian sect in his *History of the Church* 2.17.

Many scholars believe the Qumran community was a faction of the Essenes. See s.v. "Dead Sea sect," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971): vol. 5, pp. 1408-09. Some Roman elites regarded this counter-cultural community at Qumran with at least a little respect: Pliny, *Natural History* 5.73, and Dio Chrysostom, via Synesius, *Dio* 3.2. Finally, for some online guidance, see Sid Green, "From Which Religious Sect Did Jesus Emerge?" (The Secular Web: 2001): www.infidels.org/library/modern/features/2001/
green1.html.

61 In my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*, I will discuss this and other evidence, as well as scholarship, on the distinctions in values and status between lower, middle, and upper classes in ancient Roman society.

62 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 2.5.18, from the early 3rd century but citing pre-Christians sources (e.g. 2.5.19, 2.5.20-21).

63 See Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (1974): pp. 70-80. See also Ethele Brewster, *Roman Craftsmen and Tradesmen of the Early Empire* (1917), whose work was updated by Alison Burford, *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman Society* (1972).

64 Publius Licinius Philonicus & Publius Licinius Demetrius (near Rome, c. 20 B.C.), stone now on display at the British Museum (photo by Richard Carrier).

65 See the relevant entries in *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (1951). In Chapter 9 I discuss how Jews would respond to the idea of an incarnated god who became an ordinary rabbi.

66 Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 3.20.1.

67 Personal e-mail communication of 15 April 2005.

68 Still, even though it is a completely different issue, I propose my own answer to the question of why that *kerygma* was adopted to sell this social message in Richard Carrier, "Whence Christianity? A Meta-Theory for the Origins of Christianity," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 11.1 (Spring 2005): 22-34. I will develop this further in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ.*

69 On the sect of Galileans: Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius, *History of the Church* 4.22.7; and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 80. On the Social and Mithradatic Wars, see "Social War" and "Mithradates (VI)" in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996).

70 See: "Nazareth" in *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, ed. Avraham Negev & Shimon Gibson, new ed. (2001).

71 See B. Bagatti, *Excavations in Nazareth* (1969), esp. vol. 1, pp. 170-71 & 233-34.

I've heard some claim that the Gospel description of the town as built on a hill (Luke 4:29) is factually incorrect, but I've confirmed from photographs and archaeological reports that Nazareth was indeed built down the slope of a hill, and many of its houses, storerooms, and tombs were cut from the rock of that hill. The "brow" of that hill would likely have even been cut or built up to provide a suitable place for hurling the condemned as required of every town under Mishnah law (*Sanhedrin* 6.4).

72 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.27 & 18.36-37; *Jewish War* 2.167-68.

73 Josephus, *Life* 228-35, 340-46, 390-93; *Jewish War* 2.585, 2.590-94.

74 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.38-48.

75 Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.95, 3.44; *Life* 340-46; *Jewish Antiquities* 18.116-19. And see "John the Baptist" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000) with corresponding maps.

76 Richard Rohrbaugh, "The Jesus Tradition: The Gospel Writers' Strategies of Persuasion," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 198-30 (quote from pp. 218-19; Gospel of John discussed: pp. 218-22).

For the situation in modern America, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (2008).

77 See: Michael Grant, "The Poor" in *Greeks and Romans: A Social History* (1992): pp. 59-82; C.R. Whittaker, "The Poor in the City of Rome" in *Land, City and Trade in the Roman Empire* (1993): VII.1-25; and P.A. Brunt, *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (1971).

For a discussion of this point in connection with early Christianity, see: Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (2002); Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996): pp. 147-62; Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2001): pp. 26-35, 104-11.

78 Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (1998): p. 7 (quoting Halliday); cf. "John's Antisociety," ibid.: pp. 9-11.

79 See "Nazarene" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000).

80 Matthew 4:12-16, citing Isaiah 8:21-9:2.

81 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.33 (Perseus: 1.22, 1.54, and in the *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho the Jew* 67).

82 See Richard Carrier, "The Problem of the Virgin Birth Prophecy" (The Secular Web: 2003): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/virginprophecy.shtml.

83 See "Immaculate Conception" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997): pp. 821-22.

84 This quote and that of Eudemus are preserved by the Roman historian Diogenes Laertius in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.9 (3rd century A.D.). That Theopompus said this is also corroborated from the 6th century by Aeneas of Gaza in *Theophrastus* 72. Despite a few skeptics, most scholars now agree the Jews got the idea from the Persians: see the summary of modern scholarship in John Hinnells, *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies* (2000), esp. pp. 29-92.

85 That Daniel is a forgery is almost universally accepted by scholars today. For example, see "Daniel, Book of" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000), and Curt van den Heuvel's online survey of the facts in "Revealing Daniel" (2Think: 1998): www.2think.org/hundredsheep/bible/comment/daniel.shtml.

86 Again, for instance, see "Isaiah, book of" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000).

87 The best recent treatments of this aspect of Zoroastrian belief throughout Western history is provided by Alan Segal, "Iranian Views of the Afterlife and Ascent to the Heavens," *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004): pp. 173-203; Albert De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (1997), as well as "Shadow and Resurrection," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1995): pp. 215-24; and Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3 (1975): esp. pp. 367-68 and 392-440.

88 Besides what follows, for an updated analysis of a select few examples of pagan beliefs about their own resurrected gods see Tryggve Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East* (2001) and "The Dying and Rising God: The Peregrinations of a Mytheme," in *Ethnicity in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. W.H. van Soldt (2005): pp. 198-210.

89 Herodotus, *Histories* 4.94-96 & 4.13-16 (also in Apollonius, *Miraculous Stories* 2.2); Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 26. I have also discussed the issue of pagan resurrection beliefs in the "Main Argument" of Richard Carrier, "Why I Don't Buy the Resurrection Story," 6th ed. (The Secular Web: 2006): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/lecture.html; and in Richard Carrier, "Osiris and Pagan Resurrection Myths: Assessing the Till-McFall Exchange" (Frontline Apologetics: 2002): www.frontline-apologetics.com/Carrier_on_Osiris_.html. The belief that worshippers of Zalmoxis, "King and God," obtain immortality is attested in Plato, *Charmides* 156d (Zalmoxis and his followers were also noted healers: ibid. 156e-158b). The sources and sociological background for the Zalmoxis cult is excellently surveyed by Mircea Eliade in *Zalmoxis the Vanishing God* (1970).

90 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.55, 3.26, 3.22. Celsus didn't believe in resurrection only because he was an Epicurean (who, per 4.36 & 4.57, sometimes also adopted a Platonic point of view for his fictional critics of Christianity, cf. 1.8 & 4.75; note also Lucian, *Alexander the Quack Prophet* 1-3, 60-61).

91 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 2.5.17.

92 See Apollodorus, *Library* 1.3.2 & 1.9.15.

93 Euripides, *Alcestis* (see esp. lines 1115-61; notably, once risen from the grave, she could not speak "until purified in the sight of the nether gods on the third day," 1144-49).

94 Plutarch, *Theseus* 35.4-36.2. He calls it a *phasma*, "ghost," yet still a demigod, so Plutarch probably thought Theseus had appeared in a numinous divine body instead of his original body (which was still buried: Plutarch, *Cimon* 8.5-6).

95 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.15.3 The legend is discussed by Robert Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (1992): pp. 82-98; and Emily Kearns, *The Heroes of Attica* (1989): pp. 120-4. That the "resurrection" of Theseus appeared in Athenian art within 30 years of the event: see J. Neils & S. Woodford, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 7.1 (1994): pp. 922-51; and H. A. Shapiro, *Art and Cult under the Tyrants in Athens* (1989): pp. 143-49.

96 On Hercules ascending in his "divine" body while leaving the mortal part of his body behind, see: Lucian, *Hermotimus* 7, which must be read in the context provided by Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (1995): pp. 3-37, w. 115-17, 127-28; and Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Mortals and Immortals: The Body of the Divine," *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (1991): pp. 27-49. I argue this is how Jesus was originally thought to have risen, in Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Bob Price (2005): pp. 105-232; cf. also Richard Carrier & Jake O'Connell, "On Paul's Theory of Resurrection: The Carrier-O'Connell Debate" (The Secular Web: 2008): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/carrier-oconnell).

Many scholars more or less agree with me on this, e.g.: James Tabor, "Leaving the Bones Behind: A Resurrected Jesus Tradition with an *Intact* Tomb" in *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: An Inquiry* (forthcoming); Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (2004): pp. 57-58; Peter Lampe, "Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body" in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (2002), ed. Ted Peters et al.: pp. 103-14; Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (1995); Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (1995); Adela Collins, "The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark" in *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (1993), ed. Eleonore Stump & Thomas Flint: pp. 107-40; C.F. Moule, "St. Paul and Dualism: The Pauline Conception of the Resurrection," *New Testament Studies* 12 (1966): 106-23. Even N.T. Wright concedes it's a possibility in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003): p. 367.

97 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.24; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 69. For attestations to Asclepius as both *resurrected* and *resurrector*, see Edelstein & Edelstein, eds., *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (1945): esp. §66-93, §232-56 (and §382-91, §443-54).

98 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 29.1.3.

99 Aelius Aristides, *Funeral Address in Honor of Alexander* 32.25.

100 Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 13; Apuleius, *Florida* 15, *Metamorphoses* 2.28, *Florida* 19 (with a story also mentioned in Pliny, *Natural History* 26.8; and Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.6.15); Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 4.45 (the author expresses uncertainty whether she was really dead, but this proves he did not rule it out); Heraclides of Pontus, via Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 8.61, 8.67 (another account of this resurrection appears in Apollonius, *Miraculous Stories* 2.1). Proclus reports on Eurynous and Rufus in his Commentary on Plato's *Republic* 2.115-16, for which I quote the translation of William Hansen, *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels* (1996): pp. 199-200.

101 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.176-179. **Er:** Plato, *Republic* 614b. **Bouplagus & Lady Philinnion:** Phlegon, *De Mirabilibus* 3 & 1 (Lady Philinnion is also reported in Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 2.115-16). **Aridaeus:** Plutarch, *On the Delayed Vengeance of the Gods* 563b-568a. **Timarchus:** Plutarch, *On the Sign of Socrates* 590a-592e.

102 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 25.5.14 (Tylon and others); Hyginus, *Fables* 136 (Glaucus); Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library* 1.25.6 (Isis resurrecting Horus).

103 Suetonius, *Nero* 57; Tacitus, *Histories* 1.2, 2.8; Augustine, *City of God* 20.19; and some allusions in book 5 of the *Sibylline Oracles*.

104 Like Polites in Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6.6.7-11, or Polycritus in Phlegon, *De Mirabilibus* 2 and Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 2.115-16.

105 G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (1994). See also n. 39 in the "Main Argument" of Richard Carrier, "Why I Don't Buy the Resurrection Story," 6th ed. (The Secular Web: 2006): www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/lecture.html.

106 Petronius, *Satyricon* 140.frg.2; Plutarch, *On the Cleverness of Animals* 973e-974a.

107 See Ezekiel 33:21 and 37:5-14.

108 Robert Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (1961): pp. 20-21.

109 Ibid.: pp. 58.

110 Ibid.: pp. 316.

111 Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (1990); Jan Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (2002).

112 Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (1990): p. 458.

113 Jan Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (2002): p. 50.

114 Ibid.: p. 48.

115 Ibid.: p. 49.

116 Ibid.: p. 46.

117 Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.163.

118 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.14.

119 Josephus, *Life* 12, *Jewish War* 3.372-75, *Against Apion* 2.218.

120 Jan Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (2002): p. 47.

121 Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1 (1975): pp. 325-30.

122 Plutarch, *On the Delay of Divine Vengeance* 24.564d. His source appears to be a lost work by a certain Protogenes (cf. ibid. 22.563e).

123 Ibid. 23.563f and 25.565a (and ff.).

124 Plutarch, *On the Face that Appears in the Orb of the Moon* 19.932c-d and 28.943d-e.

125 Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 39.300c.

126 Polybius, *Histories* 16.12.7.

127 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.38.6.

128 Albert De Jong, "Shadow and Resurrection," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1995): pp. 215-24.

129 Ibid.: pp. 216-18.

130 Ibid.: pp. 219-20.

131 Ibid.: p. 220.

132 Waking up from an apparent death: Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus* 839a. Revival of a corpse: Phlegon, *De Mirabilibus* 3 (which says "*anestê ho Bouplagos ek tôn nekrôn*," "Bouplagus rose from the dead," the exact same terminology employed by Christians for Jesus).

133 See: Hebrews 11:35; Mark 5:42, 6:14-16; Matthew 9:25; Luke 8:55, 9:7-8; Acts 14:19-20.

134 I demonstrate this point in Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Bob Price (2005): pp. 105-232.

135 As is well argued in the works cited in n. 13 above. See also Richard Carrier, "Osiris and Pagan Resurrection Myths: Assessing the Till-McFall Exchange" (Frontline Apologetics: 2002): www.frontline-apologetics.com/Carrier_on_Osiris_.html.

136 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 648.

137 Lucian, *De Saltatione* 45.

138 Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.6.6.

139 See 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.

140 In 1 Corinthians 15:35-54, 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10, and Romans 7:18-8:18.

141 Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (1995): pp. 107-08 (he also demonstrates the popularity of the resurrection of corpses among pagan commoners: pp. 111-12, 122-23). The same conclusion is reached, from different evidence and angles, in Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (1995) and Stanley Porter, "Resurrection, the Greeks and the New Testament" in *Resurrection*, eds. Stanley Porter, Michael Hayes and David Tombs (1999): pp. 52-81. On popular funerary beliefs, see Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336* (1995): pp. 45-47, 48, 51-58.

142 Colossians 3:11 (possibly co-written by Paul).

143 Paul's views would theoretically be reflected in 1 Timothy 2:12-14 (though this was forged almost a century after Paul's time) and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-50 (which is definitely from Paul). The pastoral forgery reflects views close to what Paul appears to express in 1 Cor. 14:34-25, but scholars still debate whether that passage is also a forgery (interpolated). For Bynum's analysis of later views see Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336* (1995): pp. 26-27. Jerome's remark appears in his *Epistles* 84.6. Similar sentiments were echoed in Tertullian, *De Pallio* 3-4 and *Didascalia* 19 (cf. 1-12), etc. For discussion, see Bynum, op. cit.: pp. 90-91, 99-100.

144 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.35.

145 As already noted, e.g. 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:19-37, 13:21; Mark 5:21-43 [paralleled in: Matthew 9:18-26, Luke 8:40-56]; Luke 7:11-17; Acts 9:36-43 & 14:19-20; John 11:5-44.

146 Matthew 17:9-13.

147 That the dead went to heaven in Jewish understanding in the time of Christ: cf. b.Talmud, *Chagigah* 12b; Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 2-3, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3.10-11, 4.74; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.154-55, 3.372-75.

148 Mark 6:14-16 (cf. Matthew 14:1-2 and Luke 9:7-8). That many Jews believed Elijah would return before the general resurrection is attested in Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 49, and was most directly based on Malachi 4:5, but also "interpreted" out of certain obscure passages in Zechariah.

149 See: Hermann Strack & Paul Billerbeck, "Allgemeine oder teilweise Auferstehung der Toten?" ["Resurrection from the Dead: All at Once or in Stages?"] *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* 4.2 (1961): pp. 1166-98; Adolf Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash* (1967), 3.13; Chaim Meir Horovitz, ed., *Bet Eked ha-Agadot* (1967), 1.58; Solomon Wertheimer, ed., *Leket Midrashim* (1960), pp. 6, 12.

150 Matthew 27:52-53.

151 1 Corinthians 15:45.

152 1 Corinthians 15:22-24.

153 See Romans 13:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; and 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It seems every Christian generation for the next two centuries (or even the next two thousand years) expected it to come in their own lifetime. See, for example, Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 266-67.

154 In Romans 2:28-29 & Philippians 3:3.

155 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.21.

156 Our resurrection just like Christ's: 1 Corinthians 15:13 (and 15:15-16, 20, 23, 35); Philemon 3:21; Romans 6:5. Cf. 1 John 3:2. Our resurrection will be an ascension: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. That Paul never distinguishes the resurrection and ascension of Christ is evident from all his kerygmatic hymns and lists: his summary of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 mentions no ascension, only the resurrection (so also Romans 1:1-6). Even the summary of his Gospel in the forgery of 1 Timothy 3:16 mentions no resurrection, only the ascension. Yet Paul could not exclude mention of the resurrection in any summary of the Gospel, so he must have believed the ascension was the same thing (similarly for the "exaltation" of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11). At the very least, there is no evidence Paul regarded them as separate events.

157 Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

158 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.160-175. For more on how the Jews and their scriptures were perceived, even by their enemies, see Menahem Stern, *Greek & Latin Authors on Jews & Judaism: With Introductions, Translations & Commentary* (1981).

159 Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1986): p. 331.

160 On the unstoppable introduction and success of novel cults throughout Roman society as far as Britain, see Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (1992) and Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (1998). **Manichaeism** was such a successful innovation it had to be violently suppressed by both pagan and Christian governments alike: cf. S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2nd ed. (1992). **Antinoös** was Emperor Hadrian's lover who drowned in the Nile, and out of grief Hadrian founded a religion around the worship of his deified boy-toy. Though probably the least successful of the religions here named, it is notable for the fact that it was completely novel, yet officially sanctioned by the Imperial government, and embraced by many Romans and others. See Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.36 and Royston Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous* (1984). The worship of **Glaucon of Abonuteichos** was invented wholesale by his priest Alexander in the 2nd century A.D., yet commanded a significant and respectable following for centuries. See: Lucian, *Alexander the Quack Prophet* and the relevant material in C.P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (1986) and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1986).

161 Acts 17:21.

162 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

163 Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4-5.

164 This Stoic eschatology is described or analyzed in Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.720-60; Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Prior Analytics'* 180.33-6 & 181.25-31; Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 6; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.20-21; John Philopon, *Commentary on Aristotle's 'On Generation and Decay'* 314.9-12. Even before the time of Christ the idea is attacked by the Epicurean Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura* 3.843-64. For sources on Zoroastrian eschatology, see notes in Chapter 3.

165 This is thoroughly demonstrated by Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994) and Joseph Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics* (1996).

166 Nussbaum, op. cit.: p. 3.

167 See Robin Lane Fox, "Living Like Angels," *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 336-74.

168 Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): p. 335. He catalogues this discontent and Christianity's appeal to it in pp. 321-24 & 334 (and in pp. 325-31 he catalogues attractions of Christianity that support my general case throughout the present book). A more thorough case for exactly my point is made by Bruce Malina in *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (2000), although in some respects over-simplifying the facts. The general idea that the rich are necessarily immoral greedy liars who are not to be

trusted is explained by Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh in "Rich, Poor, and Limited Good," *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003): pp. 400-401. See also the discussion of 'limited good' in Chapter 2.

169 See Cora Lutz, *Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates* (1942). On Musonius as second only to Socrates: Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.66; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 4.46; "Letter to the High-Priest Theodorus" (16) and "Letter to Themistius" (20-22), written by the emperor Julian; Pliny, *Letters* 3.11; Dio of Prusa, *Orations* 31.122. See also Cassius Dio *Roman History* 66.13.

170 In fact, Holding's reference to temple prostitutes as a component of pagan religion has recently been refuted: there was never any such thing. See Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (2008).

171 For example, see 1 Corinthians 5 and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): p. 374. It's worth noting that the Christians did not expect perfection (Paul himself admitted to being a sinner in Romans 7:14-8:1), but allowed ample room for forgiveness and repentance before anyone was expelled for immorality (2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1; James 5:15; 1 John 1:9, 2:12; Romans 4:6-8; John 20:22-23; Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22, 18:35, 12:31, 6:12-15; Mark 3:28, 11:25).

172 On the Greek longing for socialist utopias, see Peter Green, "The Individual and Society: Slavery, Revolution, Utopias," *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (1990): pp. 382-95. On Essene communism and respect for it even among some elites, see: "Essenes" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971): 6:899-902; *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (1997): 562; *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2000): 1.262-69; and for ancient witnesses: Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.1-18 and *Every Good Man Is Free* 75-88; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.73 (or 5.15 or 5.17 in some modern editions); Synesius, *Dio* 3.2; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.119-61 and *Jewish Antiquities* 15.371-79 (the sect was honored by none other than Herod himself) and 18.18-22; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.18.3-9.28.2.

173 See Naphtali Lewis & Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (1990): § 66 & 77.

174 For discussion of this psychology in the context of modern American spirituality, see, e.g., David Myers, "Faith, Hope, and Joy" in *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1992): pp. 177-204.

175 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996): pp. 188-89. This summarizes what he demonstrates throughout the rest of his book. See also Jack Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (2000). As an added example, Christian forgiveness of moral failure (see note 7 above) was itself a very attractive feature of the movement, especially when set against the harsh and unforgiving response one might receive elsewhere.

176 That this was the staple idea of pagan religious life is thoroughly documented in: Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981); Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 27-264; and Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* & *Religions of Rome: Volume 2, A Sourcebook* (1998).

177 On the Epicurean use of this fact to argue against divine responsiveness, see: Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 2.1090-1104; 5.195-234, 1194-1240; 6.387-95; etc. On the responses of sorcerers to the failed expectations of pagans, see Plutarch, *On Superstition* and Robert Turcan, "Occultism and Theosophy," *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (1992): pp. 266-90. On the responses of holy men, see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) and Graham Anderson, *Sage, Saint, and Sophist: Holy Men and Their Associates in the Early Roman Empire* (1994): pp. 106-08.

178 For a full discussion of how humans are naturally constructed to develop superstitious thinking like this as a consequence of inevitable statistical laws (including regression to the mean), see Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (1997).

179 For instance, see the arguments to this effect advanced by the Christians: Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians*, esp. 26-27 (vs. 32-34); Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, esp. 8-10, 16-20; and Justin, *Apology* 1.5, 1.9-10, 1.14, 1.54-56, 1.62, 2.1, 2.5-7, 2.12. Also see Richard Horsley, *Paul & Empire: Religion & Power in Roman Imperial Society* (1997): esp. pp. 142-43, 176-181.

180 For a discussion of these and other natural reasons why the Christian mission had a rhetorical and systemic edge over paganism in the area of health care, see Hector Avalos, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (1999). On psychosomatic healing phenomena in general see Edward Shorter, *From Paralysis to Fatigue: A History of Psychosomatic Illness in the Modern Era* (1992). A good discussion is also available in Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 327-29.

181 2 Corinthians 4:3-4.

182 Galatians 4:8.

183 Galatians 5:17-24; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3; 2 Peter 1:4; Romans 1:20-29.

184 1 Corinthians 2:12; Ephesians 2:2, 6:12; cf. 1 John 4:1-3.

185 Acts 5:3; 26:18; 1 John 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Romans 1:19-32, 8:20-22; cf. Mark 8:33; Luke 22:3; Matthew 16:23.

186 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, 10:27-32; Galatians 2:11-14.

187 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 5:9-13.

188 Matthew 10:32-39, 12:47-50, 19:29; see also Mark 10:29-30 and Luke 12:53 (w. 14:26).

189 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14. An earlier account in Suetonius, *Domitian* 10, doesn't identify the charge.

190 This and previous quotes from Tacitus, *Annals* 3.44, 3.19, 4.11.

191 For the fact that this is the standard consensus view, and a justified view, see: Michael Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation* (1995); Charles Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (1983); John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (1997); Averil Cameron, ed. *History As Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (1990); Bruno Gentili & Giovanni Cerri, *History and Biography in Ancient Thought* (1988).

192 See scholarship in the previous note, as well as Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (1970). A good survey of scholarship on ancient historiography is also presented by Colin Hemer, "Ancient Historiography," *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1990): pp. 63-100. Hemer's botched use of this evidence for Luke-Acts is addressed later on in this chapter.

193 See "Acta" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): p. 10 (and the sources there cited).

194 The scholarship in note 2 above discusses this issue in detail, but the *locus classicus* for understanding speechmaking in ancient histories is still F.W. Wallbank, "Speeches in Greek Historians," *J.L. Myres Memorial Lecture* No. 3 (1965), discussed next.

195 Wallbank, op. cit.: p. 18.

196 In book 5 of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*.

197 Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 1.22.1 (translation from Wallbank, but emphasis added).

198 F.F. Bruce, "The Speeches in Acts," *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (1990): pp. 34-40.

199 In Bruce, op. cit.: p. 35 (n. 4).

200 Karla McLaren, "Bridging the Chasm between Two Cultures," *Skeptical Inquirer* 28.3 (May/June 2004): pp. 47-52.

201 I calculated this statistic from these facts: We know the names of at most three thousand authors—whether their writings survive or not—over the course of a thousand years (from roughly 500 B.C. to 500 A.D.). Yet in that time, the population remained steady between 60 and 120 million (throughout the territory encompassed by the Roman Empire at its height), and given the average life expectancy of less than 50 years, there would have been a complete turn-over of the population approximately every half a century, for a total of about 1 or 2 billion people. Therefore: 1000 years ÷ 50 years = 20 average lifespans; 60 to 120 million lives x 20 lifespans = 1.2 to 2.4 billion lives lived; 1.2 to 2.4 billion total lives lived ÷ 3,000 writers' lives = 400,000 to 800,000 people per known writer.

For the above population and lifespan estimates, see T.G. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (1992), esp. "Frier's Life Table for the Roman Empire" on p. 144 (which I reproduce in part at www.richardcarrier.info/lifetbl.html), and Bruce Frier, *Landlords and Tenants in Imperial Rome* (1980); Ansley Coale, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*, 2nd ed. (1983); and Roger Bagnall & Bruce Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (1994). As to the number of authors in that period, the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* contains every extant Greek author within that date range, numbering 1,384. This number includes authors known only in quotations or fragments, and most of those known only by name. It is well-known that the number of Latin authors in that period is much smaller than for Greek, so more than doubling the *TLG* number to 3,000 is without doubt a huge over-estimate.

202 I discuss this case in detail in my Columbia University Master's Thesis: Richard Carrier, "Cultural History of the Lunar and Solar Eclipse in the Early Roman Empire" (1998), available as an Acrobat document at www.richardcarrier.info/culturaleclipse.pdf.

However, in brief: the inscription set up by Claudius is discussed in Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 60.26.1, and the main passages from ancient texts that relate to all the other claims made here include: Seneca, *Natural Questions* 7.1.2 and 7.25.3, *Phaedra* 788-94, *Hercules Oetaeus* 523-27, *On Benefits* 5.6.4; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 2.54 and 25.10 (w. 2.53, 2.43); Statius, *Thebaid* 6.685-88; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.207-09 and 12.262-64, 14.365-68, *Amores* 1.8.12-14, *Heroides* 6.85-86; Lucan, *Pharsalia* 6.499-506; Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 145c-d, *Nicias* 23.1-3, *Aemilius Paulus* 17.7-11; Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 14; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 37; Marcus Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.226; Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* 1.3.1, 1.8.4; Apollonius, *Argonautica* 4.57-67; Aristophanes, *Clouds* 749-52; Plato, *Gorgias* 513a (cf. also: *Papyri Magicae Graecae* §34); Cicero, *On the Republic* 1.23; Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 44.38.5-9; Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander* 4.10.1-7; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 8.11, 11.1; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.28; Frontinus, *Stratagems* 1.12.8.

203 F.F. Bruce, "Luke as a Historian," *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (1990): p. 27 (see also pp. 27-34 and 35-46).

204 On the genre of the other Gospels, the most decisive work is still Charles Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (1977).

205 As in Mark 1:14-15, hence 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

206 Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1990); cf. also Colin Hemer, "Luke the Historian," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 60 (1977-1978): pp. 28-51.

207 See the foreword (pp. vii-viii) of Hemer, op. cit. (1990).

208 See Richard Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (2006) and David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (2000).

209 John Lentz, book review, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41.1 (April 1991): pp. 227-30.

210 For example, see Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Bob Price (2005): pp. 168-70.

211 Christopher Matthews, book review, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990): pp. 726-29.

212 C.K. Barrett, review of *The Trial of St. Paul*, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41.1 (April 1991): pp. 230-31.

213 Hemer, op. cit. (1990): p. 326.

214 For *plêrophoreô* as "fully assured" rather than "completed," see *plêrophoreô* in Henry Liddell and Robert Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*. And compare Romans 4:21, 14:5; Colossians 2:2, 4:12; and the nominal cognate in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 and Hebrews 6:11, 10:22. The same verb in 2 Timothy 4:5 & 4:17 does not mean "completed" but "satisfied." There is not even a single case in the Bible where this verb means "completed" as in "happened," and I am not aware of any cases outside the Bible, either (though if anyone thinks they've found one, please let me know). And for *kathôs* as "according to what" (i.e. "according as" or "according to how") instead of the usual (and ambiguous) translation "even as," see the entry in Liddell & Scott's lexicon (above) on *kathôs* and its synonym *katha*, which is the word's primary meaning.

215 See *epigignôskô* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

216 See Hemer, op. cit. (1990): pp. 98-99, 322-28.

217 Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.53.

218 See *akribês* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

219 See *parakooutheô* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

220 In Suetonius, *Gaius* 8.

221 From the Rolfe & Arkenberg translation available on Fordham University's website (www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/suetonius-caligula.html).

222 See: C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1998); F.F. Bruce, "The Text of Acts," *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (1990): pp. 69ff.; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2nd ed. (1972): pp. xxxiv-xxxv, xxxix-xl, 127, 215; Ernst Haenchen, "The Text of Acts," *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (1971): pp. 50ff. (on Luke not likely being a companion of Paul: pp. 88-89, 112-16, 726-32); and (on the literary creation of the "we" passages) Dennis MacDonald, "The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul," *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999): pp. 88-107.

223 Barrett, op. cit.: p. xliv.

224 Barrett, op. cit.: p. xlv.

225 Haenchen, op. cit.: p. 85; with MacDonald, op. cit. (1999).

226 John Polhill, *Acts: The New American Commentary* (1992): p. 39.

227 See references in note 33 above, plus the excellent & extensive discussion of W.A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts* (1992).

228 In the actual original text Holding wrote "No, and he could not have if it was not true," which must be a typo. Holding surely meant to omit the 'not' as his ensuing argument makes clear. Accordingly, I have omitted it.

229 Literally, Paul says *ei pathêtos ho Christos ei prôtos ex anastaseôs nekrôn phôs mellei kataggellein* (Acts 26:23) in indirect discourse, as what Moses and the prophets "said" was "going to happen" (*elalêsan mellontôn ginesthai*, 26:22), i.e. "whether the Messiah was subject to suffering, whether first from a resurrection from the dead he was going to proclaim a light," etc.

230 Quoting from the entry for *ei* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

231 See *mellô* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

232 Other than perhaps an event that no one witnessed, which is a distinct possibility I will explore in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*.

233 On this "decurion" class, see the entry for *decuriones* in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): pp. 437-38. It was the most general rank below the equestrian and senatorial classes.

234 See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 305-07.

235 Joseph was "secretly" a Disciple in John 19:38, and perhaps openly in Matthew 27:57, but merely a "seeker" (not a Disciple) in Mark 15:43 & Luke 23:50-51. On Nicodemus: John 3:1-10, 7:50-52, 19:39-41.

236 For more on Joseph's possible role in the burial of Jesus, see Richard Carrier, "The Burial of Jesus in Light of Jewish Law," *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 369-92.

237 Pliny the Younger to his friend Licinius Sura, *Letters* 7.27.1-3 & 12-14; Tacitus, *Annals* 11.21. Documenting this credulity as widespread in ancient society is Lucian's treatise *The Lover of Lies*.

238 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 19.346-50.

239 Thomas Africa, "Worms and the Death of Kings: A Cautionary Note on Disease and History," *Classical Antiquity* 1 (1982): pp. 1-17.

240 See "Iulius Agrippa II, Marcus" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): p. 779.

241 F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (1990): pp. 11-12.

242 W.A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts* (1992): p. 182.

243 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (1998): p. 63.

244 Matthew 27:51-54 and 28:2.

245 See my discussion of this in Richard Carrier, "Thallus: An Analysis" (The Secular Web: 1999) at www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/thallus.html.

246 Matthew 27:52-53.

247 See note 12 above on sources for demographics and life tables for ancient populations.

248 Josephus, *Life* 360, *Jewish War* 1.15, *Against Apion* 1.55.

249 For an account of this curious event (with further references) see the Wikipedia entry for "H. Rochester Sneath" at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Rochester_Sneath.

250 Mentioned in Mark 15:38; Matthew 27:51; and Luke 23:45. John makes no mention of it.

251 Mishnah, *Yoma* 5.1, *Middot* 1.1h, and various sections in *Sheqalim*. According to the detailed description in Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.184-227, this veil would not have been visible to anyone else.

252 Quote from David DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (2000): p. 44. For a summary and bibliography of the scholarship on early Christian persecution and martyrdom, see Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336* (1995): p. 44. For a more thorough discussion of the issue, see: W.H.C. Frend, "Martyrdom and Political Oppression," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 815-39; Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History* (1998): pp. 236-44; and Robin Lane Fox, "Persecution and Martyrdom," *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 419-92.

253 On the voiding of the legal acts of Nero and Domitian, see "*damnatio memoriae*" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): p. 427.

254 For the Pliny-Trajan exchange, see Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96-97. On the law against illegal assembly in Pliny's province at the time (which Christians were certainly violating), ibid. 10.34. See also my related discussion in Chapter 18.

255 *Diôkô*: 1 Maccabees 3:24, 4:9, 4:16, 7:45, 9:15, 11:73, 12:51, 15:39; 2 Maccabees 2:21, 2:31, 5:8 (all are military actions). *Zêlos*: 1 Maccabees 2:27, 2:54, 2:58, 8:16.

256 See *diôkô* in Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

257 See *zêlos* in Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

258 W.H.C. Frend, "Martyrdom and Political Oppression," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Esler (2000): p. 818.

259 Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004): p. 314. His entire chapter on millennial and apocalyptic movements covers the evidence and scholarship, and links it to both Judaism and Christianity, as well as Islam and several indigenous religious movements. See also Arthur Droge & James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (1992).

260 All of this is apparent to any attentive student of human history. But Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951) is still a best-selling discussion of it.

261 See Philippians 2:25; Philemon 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:18; 2 Timothy 2:3-4.

262 Philippians 1:19-24.

263 For example: 1 Corinthians 12 & 15:1-8; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 1:11-12, 15-19 & 3:5; Romans 16:25-26; Acts 9:3-9. I examine this point from several angles in Chapters 13 and 17.

264 2 Corinthians 12:6-10.

265 On this cultural context, see: Robin Lane Fox, "Seeing the Gods," *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 102-67; Alan Segal, "Religiously-Interpreted States of Consciousness: Prophecy, Self-Consciousness, and Life After Death," *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004): pp. 322-50; Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (1990): pp. 408-13, 594-95; E.R. Dodds, "The Blessings of Madness" and "Dream-Pattern and Culture-Pattern," *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951): pp. 64-101 and 102-34.

On the scientific background, see: John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border between Science and Spirituality* (2003); Eugene D'Aquili and Andrew Newberg, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (2001) and *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (1999); and further discussion and bibliography in Richard Carrier, *Sense and Goodness without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism* (2005): pp. 202-08.

On both aspects, in the context of ancient religion and early Christianity in particular, see: Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 182-95, 151-54. See also Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (1995): pp. 63-71.

266 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.60. Incidentally, Origen says these apparitions are therefore astral bodies, not flesh, as he did not believe Jesus rose in the flesh, but had switched bodies, leaving the corpse behind and donning a new astral body (cf. *Contra Celsum* 5.18-24, 6.29, 7.32, etc., along with related material in my "Spiritual Body FAQ" online at www.richardcarrier.info/SpiritualFAQ.html).

267 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, 10:20-32.

268 See e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

269 See e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:20-23.

270 See e.g. 1 Thessalonians 3:12 & 5:15 and Titus 3:2.

271 See e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:11-18 and Acts 20:33-34.

272 See e.g. 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:10; 2 Timothy 3:2.

273 See: Romans 12:17-18 & 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:12-17 & 4:15; 2 Corinthians 8:21; Galatians 6:10; Colossians 3:22; Hebrews 12:14.

274 Revelation 2:8-10 and 2:12-13.

275 See e.g. Hebrews 12; Philemon 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 1 Peter 3:18, 4:1, 4:13.

276 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.1355b-58a and 1.15.1375a.

277 See the translation of W. Rhys Roberts, reproduced by Associate Professor Lee Honeycutt of Iowa State University, at www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/Rhetoric/rhet1-2.html.

278 See: Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ? Challenging the Existence of an Historical Jesus*, rev. ed. (2000), new rev. ed. forthcoming. My own book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* (forthcoming) will examine the essentials of his theory even more thoroughly. See also Doherty's website www.jesuspuzzle.com and my critical review of Doherty's book: Richard Carrier, "Did Jesus Exist? Earl Doherty and the Argument to Ahistoricity" (The Secular Web: 2002) at www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/jesuspuzzle.shtml.

279 See, for example: 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 2:7 & 89:26-27; 1 Chronicles 17:13, 22:10-11, 28:6. Likewise, Israel (Jacob) was not only called "Son of God" but "God's firstborn son" (Hosea 11:1, Exodus 4:22-23). See "Son of God" in the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, ed. Jacob Neusner (1996).

280 See, for example: John 1:12-13; Galatians 3:26-27 & 4:5-6; Romans 8:14-17; 1 John 5:1. And see "Son of God" in Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003): pp. 408-09.

281 See: David Horrell, "Early Jewish Christianity," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 136-67. For the shift in the first century toward a predominately Gentile Christianity see: Todd Klutz, "Paul and the Development of Gentile Christianity," ibid.: pp. 168-97. On later doctoring of the New Testament to conceal this fact: Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (1993): esp. "Anti-Adoptionistic Corruptions of Scripture," pp. 47-118.

282 See, for example: Numbers 11:25, 11:29, 24:2; Judges 3:9-10, 6:34, 11:29, 14:6, 14:19, 15:14; 1 Samuel 10:6, 10:10, 11:6, 16:13, 19:20, 19:23; 2 Chronicles 15:1, 20:14, 24:20; Isaiah 11:2, 59:21, 61:1; Ezekiel 11:5, 37:12-14 (which anticipates the Christian idea that at the Resurrection God's spirit will inhabit all the saved, exactly as Paul says has happened); Micah 3:8; Zechariah 7:12. See also: Exodus 31:1-5; Numbers 23:7 (the Septuagint text); Daniel 4:8-9, 4:18, 5:11, 5:14 (all singular in the Septuagint text).

283 And this idea may even be a later development, since the authenticity of Colossians is in doubt: see "Colossians, Letter to the" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000).

284 Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 62-63.

285 Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 146. Compare John 1:1, Gal. 3:27, Rom. 15:7, 1 Cor. 11:1, etc.

286 Philo, *On Dreams* 1.215.

287 John Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE - 117 CE)* (1993): quote from p. 83. See also: Morton Smith, "Palestinian Judaism in the First Century," *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, ed. Moshe Davis (1956): pp. 67-81; and Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, ed. by Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder (2005): pp. 107-18.

288 Acts 14:11-13.

289 Acts 28:3-6.

290 Plutarch, *Romulus* 27-28; Acts 14:11-12; Celsus, as quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.9. And see related notes in Chapter 1.

291 N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003): pp. 720, 721 (cf. pp. 719-38).

292 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.73. See note 11 below for sources on the Essene sect.

293 Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 18-21.

294 Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (1996). Numbers in parentheses after POP in the body of this chapter refer to pages in this book. Malina's theories of the origin and development of Christianity can be further pursued in: Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (2000), on which see notes below, as well as *The New Jerusalem in the Revelation of John: The City As Symbol of Life with God* (2000) and *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (1986); and Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003) and *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel on John* (1998). See also Bruce Malina & John Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (2000).

295 As Bruce Malina explains in *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2000): pp. 141-61.

296 Bruce Malina to Richard Carrier, e-mail of 15 April 2005.

297 For example, see Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 58.374e and 78.382e-f. I'll discuss this phenomenon in greater detail in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*.

298 On Origin's discussion of such multi-level 'truths' within the Church see my related discussion in my "Spiritual Body FAQ" at www.richardcarrier.info/SpiritualFAQ.html#origen.

299 See Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (2003): pp. 28-31.

300 Josephus, *Life* 2 (pars. 7-12).

301 Nasaraeans and Ossaeans: Epiphanius, *Panarion* 18-19 (the Nasaraeans should not be confused with the Nazoreans, which appears to have been the original name for the Christians (and thus the collective name for Torah-observant Christians): Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29; Jerome, *Epistles* 112.13; Acts 24:5.

302 On Jewish sects of the time: Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Bob Price (2005): pp. 107-10, 198-201 (with related material in my "Spiritual Body FAQ" at www.richardcarrier.info/SpiritualFAQ.html).

303 Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2001): pp. 141-61.

304 As Lucian explains in his autobiographical oration *The Dream* (aka *Lucian's Career*). I provide a more detailed analysis of this point in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*.

305 As explained in Chapter 1, and by Holding's own favorite scholar: David DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (2000): pp. 51-55.

306 This and following quotation from the conclusion of Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (2001): pp. 217, 216. So, also, his conclusion to *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2000): pp. 141-61.

307 See excellent summaries in Bruce Malina & John Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (2000): pp. 1-13, 19-24, 41-44. I cannot emphasize more: these three sections are required reading for anyone who intends to engage in biblical interpretation. See also *Portraits of Paul* (1996): pp. 212-18 and his priceless introduction to *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2000): pp. 1-13, which is also a must-read.

308 On this model of Christian motivation see Richard Carrier, "Whence Christianity? A Meta-Theory for the Origins of Christianity," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 11.1 (Spring 2005): 22-34.

309 See: Romans 13:1-7; Colossians 3:22; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Timothy 2:1-2 & 6:1-2; 1 Peter 2:12-17.

310 See: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 3:6 & 5:30.

311 John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-15 & 8:23; Galatians 3:26-27 & 4:5-6; Ephesians 1:5; 1 John 5:1; etc.

312 David DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (2000): pp. 60 and 200.

313 DeSilva, op. cit.: p. 211.

314 DeSilva, op. cit.: pp. 71, 199-239.

315 Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 90 and *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4.74.

316 See: Evan Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I: the Case of St. Teresa," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): pp. 143-163; "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part II: The Challenge to Theism," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): pp. 297-313; and "Can Science Explain Mysticism?" *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): pp. 213-227. See also Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (2000): pp. 129-31; Alan Segal, "Religiously-Interpreted States of Consciousness: Prophecy, Self-Consciousness, and Life After Death," in *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (2004): pp. 322-50; and I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession* (1989). Further relevant sources on this point will appear in my forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ*.

317 Bruce Malina & John Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (2000): pp. 5, 43.

318 Besides material in earlier note above, see: Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003): pp. 140, 369, 398-99; and *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel on John* (1998): pp. 282-85.

319 Bruce Malina to Richard Carrier, e-mail of 15 April 2005. He referred me to John Pilch, "Altered States of Consciousness in the Synoptics," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce Malina and Gerd Theissen (2002): pp. 103-116.

320 On all of this see references in note 14 in Chapter 8 (and note 25 above).

321 This was well-documented long ago in the still-masterful study by A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (1933). On social mobility in general, the relevant facts can be gleaned from Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*, and Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, 2nd ed. (1998).

322 See the concise yet thorough summary of anti-Christian polemic up to the end of the 2nd century in R. J. Hoffmann, *Celsus on the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians* (1987): pp. 5-49. See in particular such examples as in Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 3.

323 Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 11-12 & 31-32; Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.4-7 & 1.16-17.

324 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.69-70.

325 This case is excellently made in Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective* (2000). I cannot recommend this book more. It is essential reading on the subject of Christianity's origin and success, even if Malina occasionally exaggerates, oversimplifies, or errs on various points, warranting some caution (I'll discuss an example in Chapter 11).

326 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.2.

327 Gillian Cloke, "Women, Worship, and Mission: The Church in the Household," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 422-51 (quotes from p. 423).

328 Romans 16:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (esp. 3:11); and Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96.8. For more on women in the early expansion of the Christian church, see Chapter 18.

329 See Richard Carrier, 'What about Women?' in "Reply to McFall on Jesus as a Philosopher" (Frontline Apologetics, 2004: at www.frontline-apologetics.com/carrier_on_jesus_2.htm#s22) and the sources cited there (with further discussion in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*), as well as "Women in Cult" and "Women in Philosophy" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): pp. 1624-26. For a Jewish sect that admitted women, see Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 90 and *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4.74 (Philo in fact praises this, rather than frowning on it). For women as supporters of synagogues, see William Horbury, "Women in Office," *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3 (1999): pp. 388-401; and Bernadette Brooten, "Inscriptional Evidence for Women as Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 20 (1981): pp. 1-17. On Jewish women receiving positions of authority and prestige in mainstream sects, see Peter W. van der Horst, "Conflicting Images of Women in Ancient Judaism," *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction*, 2nd ed. (1998): pp. 73-92.

330 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.59-60.

331 **Masada:** Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.399. **Gamala:** Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.81.

332 For an example of contemporary skepticism of Josephus' Masada and Gamala tales see: Kenneth Atkinson, "Noble Deaths at Gamla and Masada? A Critical Assessment of Josephus' Accounts of Jewish Resistance in Light of Archaeological Discoveries," in *Making History: Josephus and Historical Method*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers (2007): pp. 349-71. One sign is that the two stories are very similar and yet coincidentally attested by exactly two women in each case.

333 Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (1996): p. 82.

334 See Michael Gagarin & David Cohen, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law* (2005): pp. 150-51.

335 The only three sources Malina & Neyrey cite are: Robert Bonner & Hansen Harrell, *Evidence in Athenian Courts and Public Arbitration in Athenian Law* (1905): pp. 27-28, 32; Robert Bonner, *Lawyers and Litigants in Ancient Athens: The Genesis of the Legal Profession* (1927 - which makes this their most recent source, at 75 years obsolete): pp. 185-88; and A. Greenidge, *The Legal Procedure of Cicero's Time* (1901): pp. 482-83.

336 Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.1.94 (the testimony of women is approved again at 4.99).

337 Jane Rowlandson, ed., *Women & Society in Greek & Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook* (1998): § 91 (pp. 117-18) = *P.Oxy*. 1.37 (Egypt, 49 A.D.); § 257 (pp. 324-25) = *BGU* 4.1105 (Alexandria, 10 B.C.).

338 *Digest of Justinian* 22.5.18; cf. also *Digest of Justinian* 12.2.3.3, 12.2.26.pr., 12.2.28.7, 12.2.30.2, etc.

339 Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 3.8.6, 8.2.3, and 8.3.

340 *Digest of Justinian* 3.1.1.5 (cf. 3.1.2-3). See the discussion, with numerous examples of women acting as lawyers in Roman courts during the Roman Republic, in: Richard Bauman, "Women in Law," *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (1992): pp. 45-52.

341 *Digest of Justinian* 48.2.

342 See the relevant entries in Adolf Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law* (1953), esp. "coemptio fiduciae causa" (p. 393), "femina" (p. 469), "ius liberorum" (p. 530), "matrona" (p. 578), "meretrix" (p. 581), "testamenti factio" (pp. 732-33), "testis" (pp. 735-36), "tutela mulierum" (p. 748).

343 Gaius, *Institutes* 1.190-91.

344 Like many other Jewish sects, Christianity sold itself as specifically anti-Pharisee (e.g. Mark 2:18, 2:23-28, 3:1-6, 7:1-23, 10:2-12; Matthew 12:1-45, 15:1-14, 19:3-12, 23:1-36; Luke 5:30-33, 6:1-11, 11:37-54, 14:1-6, 16:14-18, 18:9-14; John 5:9-16; etc.), although these passages largely contain false caricatures of the actual Pharisees, who were really closer in their teachings to the Christians than the Gospels reveal.

345 See Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 3:3.

346 From "Witness," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 16: (1971): p. 586.

347 Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (1988): pp. 119-127.

348 Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 46a.

349 Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 24b-27b.

350 On women testifying in court, see: Mishnha, *Ketubot* 1:6-7, 2:5-6; *Yebamot* 15:1-16:7; *Eduyyot* 3:6; and also: Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 65b, *Yebamot* 88b, *Sotah* 31b (and Mishnah, *Sotah* 6). On the general requirement of two witnesses (regardless of gender): Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15; Matthew 18:16, 26:60; John 8:17; 1 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28.

351 Babylonian Talmud, *Mas. Sotah* 31b.

352 See Mishnah, *Shabuot* 3:10-11, 5:1, 7:7-8.

353 Mishnah, *Shabuot* 4:3-13.

354 Babylonian Talmud, *Shebuot* 30a.

355 Babylonian Talmud, *Shebuot* 30b.

356 See: Mishnah, *Rosh Hashshanah* 1:3-2:3 and 2:5.

357 See: Mishnah, *Rosh Hashshanah* 2:6-2:8.

358 Babylonian Talmud, *Yebamot* 114b-115a.

359 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 4.219.

360 See, for example, Richard Carrier, "The Burial of Jesus in Light of Jewish Law" and "The Plausibility of Theft," both in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Robert Price (2005): pp. 369-92 and pp. 349-68 (respectively).

361 Richard Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb" in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Robert Price (2005): pp. 105-232 (cf. Part II: "The Legend of the Empty Tomb," pp. 155-97, esp. pp. 158-63, and for points about to be made here, pp. 163-65).

362 For example: Mark 4:30-32, 7:15, 10:29-30, 10:44, 12:1-11; also: 8:35, 10:30.

363 Mark 4:11-12 & 4:33-34.

364 Micah 6:4, 1 Chronicles 6:3, Numbers 26:59. Deliverance and song: Exodus 15:20-21.

365 Septuagint text of Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus in Luke 7:22.

366 Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 49a-b.

367 See "Am Ha-arez" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 2: pp. 833-36 (quote from p. 835).

368 As I already discussed in Chapter 10, but see also Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003): pp. 366-68 ("Gossip") and pp. 402-403 ("Secrecy").

369 Proverbs 11:13, 16:28, 17:9, 20:19, 25:9, 26:20 (respectively).

370 1 Timothy 5:13 and 1 Peter 4:15 (*allotriepiskopos* = *allotrios* + *episkopos* = an overseer of someone else's affairs).

371 As argued in Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (2001): pp. 40-42.

372 See notes in Chapter 10 for Malina and DeSilva's books on this subject (the sociology of the early Christian mission).

373 1 Corinthians 9:20-23.

374 In Herodotus' *Histories* he mentions sources or methods: e.g. 2.123; 1.5, 4.195; names sources: e.g. 1.20-21, 2.29, 4.14, 4.29, 5.86-87, 6.53-54, 8.55, 8.65; gives different accounts: e.g. 1.3-5, 2.20-27, 5.86-87, 6.53-54, 7.148-152; expresses skepticism: e.g. 2.45, 3.16, 4.25, 4.31, 4.42, 4.95-96, 4.105, 5.86, 7.152.

375 Herodotus, *Histories* 8.37-38, 8.55, 8.129, 7.57, and 9.120 (respectively).

376 For example, see: Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (2008); Thomas Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (2000); François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (1988). See also: Nino Luraghi, *The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (2001) and Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (1989).

377 Observe: Acts 2:43, 3:1-11, 4:30-31, 5:1-16, 6:8, 8:7-13, 13:11-12, 14:3, 19:11-12, etc. On psychosomatic conditions in history see note 5 in Chapter 6.

378 Acts 26:19 (cf. Acts 9:3-9, 22:6-11, 26:13-19; Galatians 1:11-12 & 1:15-16) and Acts 7:54-60.

379 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.66 and *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 100-107. Justin cites the census records and the *Acts of Pilate* in *Apology* 1.34 &. 1.35 (respectively).

380 On these statistics see André Lemaire, "Earliest Archaeological Evidence of Jesus Found in Jerusalem," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28:6 (November/December 2002): pp. 25-33, 70.

381 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.31 (previous quote from 1.23). Note that the "letters" from emperors appended to the end of this apology are generally agreed to be forgeries (not necessarily by Justin).

382 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 2 (conversion: 3-8; the venerability of scripture convinces him: 7-8). I thoroughly analyze the anti-scientific and anti-empirical elements of this and other early Christian literature in my forthcoming book *The Scientist in the Early Roman Empire*.

383 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin and Trypho the Jew* 30 & 39, respectively (on Judaism being the only plausible competitor to Christianity: 8-9).

384 Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 7 (that scripture is his only source of 'evidence', cf. 9-10).

385 For example, see Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 10.

386 Athenagoras, *Treatise on the Resurrection* 1-2.

387 Athenagoras, *Treatise on the Resurrection* 12-15.

388 For example: Aristides, *Apology* 2 & 16. There is an extended Greek 'quotation' of Aristides in a work of later Christian fiction, which extensively 'adds' to the complete Syriac translation of the original speech. Scholars conclude the Greek extract is not a trustworthy version of the actual speech. On this and Aristides in general, see the scholarly introduction to "The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher," by D.M. Kay in vol. 10 of the standard edition of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

389 Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 29.

390 Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 31-32.

391 Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 1-3 & 25-26.

392 See, for example, Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 35.

393 This comes from introduction to Papias, *The Sayings of the Lord Explained*, as quoted in Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.39.3-4. Eusebius rightly concludes (ibid. § 1-2 & 5-7) that Aristion and this presbyter John were not witnesses, but students of witnesses, and thus disciples only by pedigree.

394 From Papias, *The Sayings of the Lord Explained*, as quoted in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

395 Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.39.13 (in 3.39.11, Eusebius records that oral tradition was the only source Papias had or trusted).

396 Mark 13:32 ("But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but only the Father"); Luke 8:43-48 ("Who touched me?"), although the latter doesn't actually say Jesus didn't know who it was (rather than merely asking the culprit to fess up).

397 See Chapter 1 and, e.g.: Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:11, 2:21, 3:18, 4:1, 4:13, 5:1; Hebrews 2:9 & 13:12.

398 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.21-25.

399 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.23.

400 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.16.

401 Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (2003): p. 414 ("Surrogate Family"), emphasis added.

402 Richard Carrier, "Whence Christianity? A Meta-Theory for the Origins of Christianity," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 11.1 (Spring 2005): 22-34.

403 On prophecy as an ongoing phenomenon in the Church of Paul's day see: Romans 12:6 and 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 13:9, 14:1-39.

404 **Moral Virtues as Criterion:** 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, 12:7-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:5. **Scripture as Authoritative:** Romans 15:4, 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 4:6, 15:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:15-16. **Revelation as Authoritative:** 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, 12:8, 13:2; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9; Galatians 2:1-2 (note how Paul occasionally distinguishes between his opinion and instructions from God, e.g. 1 Corinthians 7:12, 7:25 vs. 14:37), see also Ephesians 3 & 2 Peter 1:16-18 (plus examples in Acts of trusting visions: 7:55-56, 10:1-7, 11:5-14, 12:6-11, 16:9-10, 22:17-21).
Miracles as Criterion: 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 ("my speech and my preaching were *not* in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the *spirit* and of *power*, so your faith would not stand on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God," emphasis mine); 2 Corinthians 12:12 ("truly the signs of an Apostle were wrought among you in all patience, by signs and wonders and mighty works"); 1 Thessalonians 1:5 ("how that our gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance, even as you know what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sake"); Hebrews 2:3-4 ("what was spoken through the Lord, was confirmed to us by them that heard, and God bore witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will").

405 Galatians 1:7-9 (emphasis mine).

406 Galatians 1:11-17 (emphasis mine).

407 1 Timothy 6:3-4.

408 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

409 2 Timothy 2:7 (e.g. Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11-12, 21:13-15).

410 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

411 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.9-10. Galen made a similar observation about Christians in *On the Different Kinds of Pulses* 2.4 & 3.3 (= Kühn 8.579 & 8.657) and elsewhere, cf. Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (1949).

412 See www.tektonics.org/lp/nwjcarr17.html.

413 For the most thorough scholarly analysis of this dubious passage, with a current bibliography, see: James Carleton Paget, "Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52.2 (October 2001): pp. 539-624.

414 Acts 13:46-48, 18:6, 28:24-31.

415 For Unnamed Christian sects condemned in the New Testament: Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:4-6; 2 Corinthians 11:4, 13; 2 Thessalonians 2:2-5, 15; 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 7, 5:15; 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 3:4-7, 9-10, 13-14; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 3:16; 1 John 4:1; Jude 3-4, 8-16; Romans 16:17-18; Philemon 1:15-17; Hebrews 13:8-9.

416 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

417 Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4.

418 Suetonius identifies Christians correctly when he mentions their persecution under Nero in *Life of Nero* 16.2.

419 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14; Suetonius, *Domitian* 10. Later Christian legend invented versions of this event in which the victims were Christians, but these are exposed as fictions by the earlier versions in Dio and Suetonius.

420 Revelation 7:4 & 14:1-3.

421 Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicals* 2.30.6-8. The strongest advocate for Tacitean authorship of this passage is Eric Laupot in "Tacitus' Fragment 2: The Anti-Roman Movement of the *Christiani* and the Nazoreans," *Vigiliae Christianae* 54.3 (2000): pp. 233-47. Though he thinks a different group was meant (and 'Christians' was simply a confusion), Laupot's arguments are still multiply flawed. See Richard Carrier, "Severus Is Not Quoting Tacitus: A Rebuttal to Eric Laupot" (The Secular Web: 2006) at www.infidels.org/library /modern/richard_carrier/laupot.html.

422 See Orosius, *History Against the Pagans* 7.9.4-6.

423 See Acts 16:16-40, 17:5-9, 18:12-19, 19:23-41, 21:27-23:25.

424 See Richard Carrier, "The Plausibility of Theft" in *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave*, eds. Jeff Lowder & Robert Price (2005): pp. 350-51, and p. 365 n. 4. See also Richard Carrier, "The Nazareth Inscription" (The Secular Web: 2000) at www.infidels. org/library/modern/richard_carrier/nazarethlaw.html.

425 See Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96-97.

426 See Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.34. On the legal status of Christians (as well as the crime of illegal association) see: Naphtali Lewis & Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (1990): § 51-52 (see also § 169 and n. 37 in § 68); Timothy Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians," *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): pp. 32-50; W.H.C. Frend, "Martyrdom and Political Oppression," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 815-39.

427 Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96.6.

428 Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96.1-2.

429 See "Pliny (2) the Younger" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996): p. 1198. That Pliny had already served as governor of Bithynia for well over a year: Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.15, 10.17b, and 10.88.

430 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996): pp. 4-13. I have seen estimates as high as 120 million for the total population of the Roman Empire, but never lower than 60 million (the number Stark accepts), and of course the population no doubt fluctuated, especially during famines and plagues, of which there were a few catastrophic examples in the first three centuries. I will assume the figure of 60 million is more or less correct.

431 W.V. Harris, ed., *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation* (2005). See also Jack Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (2000): pp. 135-59.

432 Bruce Malina, in a book review (of Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*) in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997): pp. 593-595.

433 Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.2 (1998): pp. 185-226. Hopkins also wrote a clever and fascinating work of historical fiction, *A World Full of Gods: The Strange Triumph of Christianity* (2001), on ancient religion and the means Christianity used to exploit popular religious culture to its own advantage.

434 Thomas Finn, "Mission and Expansion," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 295-315; and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans & Christians* (1987): pp. 268-69 (for later centuries: pp. 314-17).

435 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.69.

436 Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6.43.11.

437 John Polhill, *Acts: The New American Commentary* (1992): pp. 49-50.

438 Richard Rohrbaugh, "The Jesus Tradition: The Gospel Writers' Strategies of Persuasion," *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Esler (2000): pp. 218-19, pp. 211-14, and pp. 209-10.

439 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (1998): p. 55.

440 See: Margaret Williams, "VII.2. Pagans Sympathetic to Judaism" and "VII.3. Pagan Converts to Judaism" in *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diasporan Sourcebook* (1998): pp. 163-79.

441 Robin Lane Fox accomplishes a superb survey of the social marketing of early Christianity in *Pagans & Christians* (1987): esp. pp. 293-96, 299-304, 308-11, 317-18, 330 (Fox also defends the same theory I do, e.g. pp. 334-35; on Judaized pagans and Diaspora Jews as main targets: pp. 318-19). Jack Sanders *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity*, (2000): pp. 135-59 (Sanders also corrects many of the errors or over-simplifications made by Rodney Stark, although caution is still in order: Sanders still fails to distinguish the wider audience of Gentiles from Gentiles who were already sympathetic to and thus socially connected with Judaism, and he often conflates historical periods in his analysis, except when he discusses the changing fortunes of women within Christianity).

442 See Gilbert Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method* (1946): §149a.

443 See works by Hopkins and Fox cited in notes above.

444 For quick surveys of everything that follows: John Drinkwater, "Maximinus to Diocletian and the 'Crisis'," *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 12: The Crisis of Empire, AD 193-337*, 2nd ed. (2005): pp. 28-66; "The Third Century," Mary Boatwright, et al., *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (2004): pp. 431-58; "The Crisis of the Empire in the Third Century," M. Cary & H. Scullard, *A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine*, 3rd ed. (1975): pp. 507-16; and the introduction to Averil Cameron's *The Later Roman Empire: A.D. 284-430* (1993): pp. 1-12 (see also the works listed there on pp. 209-10). For more detail: Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (1997); Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from*

Severus to Constantine (2001); and Michael Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire* (1999). On details and evidence regarding the collapse of the economy, see: Dominic Rathbone, "Prices and Price Formation in Roman Egypt," *Economie Antique: Prix et Formation Des Prix Dans Les Economies Antiques*, eds. Jean Andreau, Pierre Briant and Raymond Descat (1997): pp. 183-244.

445 See, for example, Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (1993).